

Country Analysis: Is Early Childhood Development (ECD) included in Emergency Planning and Policy?¹

Emergencies of one kind or another are occurring in almost every country in the world, with increased frequency. Emergencies have many causes, some of them are the result of nature and others are man-made. And it is clear that actions by the human race are increasing the possibility of 'natural' disasters. Some emergencies can be anticipated, given the geography and history of disasters in a region (e.g., earthquakes in Pakistan and Iran). Other disasters and the consequent emergency have taken countries by surprise (e.g., the Tsunami in Asia). Then there are the man-made emergencies (war, conflict, and the remnants left behind, such as landmines), which continue to plague many countries.

A complicating factor is that emergencies consist of a number of related phases - preparedness, including prevention and mitigation; immediate response; and recovery, including rehabilitation and reconstruction. The key stakeholders involved in responding will vary according to the phase of the emergency and populations may be affected differentially during the various phases. Even though emergencies present highly complex challenges, plans, manuals and guidelines have been developed to help guide responses during each phase. However, one segment of the population is neglected in most of these plans – the youngest children, from birth to 8 years of age, referred to as the Early Childhood Development (ECD) population. Yet, it is estimated that this age group represents the highest percentage of those affected by today's global emergencies.

While there are commonalities across countries in terms of the ways in which they would respond to an emergency, countries differ in terms of the kinds of emergencies that are likely to occur and the resources that they can bring to bear to respond effectively. Thus each country needs to develop its own Emergency Action Plan and set of strategies to respond to young children and their families appropriately at different points in an emergency. Having an explicit focus on ECD in disaster preparedness and emergency response policies ensures that in an emergency ECD will be integrated early into the response and remain a priority for the future. This short guide is designed to help countries assess the extent to which they are prepared to address the needs and rights of its youngest citizens during an emergency.

Why focus on young children in emergencies?

Underscoring the effects of crises on young children is the mandate of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Specific to young children, General Comment 7 (GC7) on 'Implementing Child's Rights in Early Childhood' offers a framework for looking at young children within the CRC. The document addresses the fact that young children's rights are often overlooked, especially in emergency settings. Article 6 specifically acknowledges early childhood as a time of particular vulnerability, with threats to their overall development. To address those

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vulnerabilities, GC7 recommends that all young children be given age-appropriate guidance and support, in the form of holistic ECD activities, so that young children are able to develop into active and capable contributors to society.

How prepared is your country to respond to young children in an emergency?

To determine your country's preparedness for an emergency in relation to young children, there are a series of questions that you can ask to determine the extent to which your country has made an explicit commitment to young children.

1. Is there a national Early Childhood policy?

Many countries now have national policies that address the rights of young children. These policies explain what the country has determined as its responsibility in relation to supporting young children's growth and development and the responsibilities of families and communities. Even where there are Early Childhood policies, however, few of them describe the responsibilities of various actors during an emergency. Thus another place to look in terms of policies and plans in relation to young children is in national Emergency Action Plans.

2. Does your country have an Emergency policy and/or plan?

As a result of the fact that there are some emergencies frequently occur within a country, many countries now have explicit policies and plans for how they will respond in an emergency. Some countries have gone so far as to develop national ministries or commissions responsible for disaster preparedness and response. It is important to undertake an examination of these policies and plans to see to what extent they have been inclusive of how to respond to the youngest children.

3. If there is a national Emergency Action Plan, who are the primary actors who have been involved in creating the emergency policy and/or plan, and who has been defined as responsible for addressing the youngest children?

One of the challenges in working with young children is that their development is holistic. What that means is that there is no single sector responsible for supporting young children. The actions of many sectors have an impact on children's survival, growth and development: health, water and sanitation, nutrition, protection and education. Thus, at a minimum, within each sector plan there should be an explicit description of the actions the sector will take in an emergency to address ECD issues. But more is required to address children's holistic rights and needs. In order to facilitate cross-sectoral response, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance, has developed the Cluster Approach. This provides a framework for addressing gaps and strengthening the effectiveness of humanitarian response through building partnerships. The Cluster approach clarifies the division of labour among organizations, and better defines their roles and responsibilities within the different sectors of the response. Potentially, the approach outlines information on what actions need to be taken by the various actors involved in order to maximize resources and ensure that appropriate actions are taken in a timely way.

4. *Does your country have a Cluster Approach, and if so, who are the primary actors in that approach, and what are their responsibilities in relation to young children?*

A national Emergency Action Plan may define in very general terms the kinds of things that need to be provided (e.g. safe spaces for children), but what explicitly does that mean on-the-ground? Are there specific guidelines and suggestions of activities that can be undertaken with young children and their families? Such guidelines are now being developed and are excellent reference points in your assessment of your country's preparedness in relation to young children. (The resource section below can assist you in your assessment.)

5. *What is the capacity of people at different levels – from the national to the regional and/or district levels, to the community – to work with young children?*

While national Emergency Action Plans may make explicit reference to how to respond to young children and their families, a key question has to do with local and national capacity to actually carry out plans and activities. A capacity assessment will help you identify key actors at all levels, the kind of skills and knowledge they have and their ability to respond appropriately to young children. If there are currently ECD activities in your countries, then the ECD community, particularly at the local level, can be drawn on in an emergency response. The implementation of quality ECD programs should be a part of any Emergency Preparedness Plan (EPP).

6. *What materials are available for use with young children?*

In addition to people who can respond at any phase of an emergency, there need to be materials available that can be used with young children. UNICEF has developed an ECD Emergency Kit that includes things that will help stimulate young children's overall development, providing the foundation for later learning. Save the Children and other International NGOs have comparable kits. These kits can serve as models for the creation of locally created kits that may well differ from region to region in a given country.

7. *Is there a need to engage in advocacy so that ECD is more prominent in Emergency Preparedness and Response Plans?*

As noted, young children and their rights and needs must be addressed explicitly in emergency preparedness and response plans and policies or they are unlikely to be addressed at all. If your assessment reveals that there is little or no explicit provision for young children (i.e., your answer is "no" to any of the above), then it may be necessary to engage in advocacy efforts to bring the rights and needs of young children to the attention of planners and policy makers; ECD needs to be included explicitly in emergency preparedness and response.

What resources are available to help in assessment and development of ECD in Emergency Action Plans?

When undertaking a national assessment there are tools available to help you understand what you can look for in assessing the adequacy of ECD in Emergency Action Plans. These include:

- *General Comment 7: Implementing Rights in Early Childhood (GC7)*. This provides explicit reference points in terms of a country's response to young children based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A copy of GC7 can be found at: www.ecdgroup.com.
- *The International Network of Education in Emergencies (INEE)* provides access to the following materials, found at www.ineesite.org:
 - Operational Guidance on Infant and Young Child Feeding in Emergencies (2001)
 - INEE Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies (2004), Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction
 - Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children (2004)
 - Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines for HIV/AIDS Interventions in Emergency Settings (2005)
 - UN Interagency Policy on Mine Action and Effective Coordination (2005)
 - Guidebook for Planning Education in Emergencies and Reconstruction (2006), in particular, Chapter 13, "Early Childhood Development"
 - Guidelines on the Formal Determination of the Best Interests of the Child (2006)
 - Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-Being Among Children in Severe Food Shortage Situations (2006)
 - A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All (2007)
- *Save the Children* has produced many resources for working in emergencies. See: *The Unique Needs of Children in Emergencies, A Guide for the Inclusion of Children in Emergency Operations Plans* September 2007. www.savethechildren.net
- A comprehensive set of references in terms of background documents and guidelines and tools as they are being developed can be found at the website of the Consultative Group on early Childhood Care and Development www.ecdgroup.com

It is important to remember that no organization or institution outside of a country can provide your country with an appropriate policy or plan in relation to responding to young children and their families in an emergency. It is up to national actors to determine what can and should be done to support the growth and development of its youngest citizens. You can play an important role in ensuring that the rights and needs of young children are addressed in your country. Working with others, you can conduct an assessment of your country's current ability to respond to young children in emergencies, and then to engage in advocacy and take action on behalf of young children and their families in emergencies.