

CLIMATE CHANGE, MIGRATION AND CHILDREN AT RISK

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Abstract

Climate change, in today's world, has emerged as a global problem. Its adverse impacts affect all of us, especially children. Climate change may lead to migration and displacement of children which in turn would lead to violation of their rights. Today, across the globe, the ravages of climate change have put the lives of millions of children at increased risk. This paper focuses on impact of climate change on children and subsequent problems. The paper also tries to analyze the extent to which climate crises could have effect on children. The paper concludes the discussion with the idea that in order to protect children from the life-threatening effects of climate change, it is imperative to pay special attention on the problems that they face and ensure their active participation in the decision-making process at all levels that would have effect on them either directly or indirectly.

Keywords: Climate Change, Migration, Displacement, Children, Risk, Protection.

Introduction

“Climate change is the biggest global threat of the 21st century” (Schlichting, 2013, p. 349). All human beings, especially children are affected by the adverse impacts of climate change. UNICEF stated that children suffer more from a change in climate than others (UNICEF, 2017). “Climate change has occurred naturally throughout the ages, and continues to occur without human interference” (Roschmann, 2013, p. 204). But climate change events caused by “human forcings”, throughout the globe, have become an increasing concern for all. Climate change may lead to migration and displacement of children which in turn would lead to violation of their rights. These days, across the globe, the adverse effects of climate change have put the lives of millions of children at increased risk. Currently, one in four children of the world lives in places affected by conflicts and disasters (UNICEF, 2019).

Climate Change and Children

“Climate change is not just an environmental crisis, it is also a crisis for children” (UNICEF, 2017, p. 11). Climate related problems such as drought, flooding, extreme weather events, etc. directly undermine a wide variety of children's rights (CRN, 2019). According to a report, almost half of all deaths among children (less than 5 years of age) are associated with undernutrition, which also places them at greater risk of dying from infections and diseases (CRN, 2019). Today, due to rising temperatures the incidence of water and vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever are also increasing which are very sensitive to changing climate and environmental conditions. Again, as a result of natural disasters like drought, flooding and changing precipitation patterns, diarrhoeal disease is also increasing which threatens safe water supplies and hygiene practices. By 2030, climate-related increases in diarrhoeal disease is predicted to lead to the death of an additional 48,000 children under the age of 15 years (CRN, 2019).

It may be noted that beyond children's rights to life, survival, development and health, climate change also threatens their right to education. The following points can be made in this context (CRN, 2019):

- Extreme weather events destroy schools. Again, children's ability to learn is affected by climate-related impacts on nutrition and their physical and mental health.
- Loss of family livelihoods and income due to climate stress is also correlated with loss of education as children are obliged to assist with household tasks, or to seek work. This in turn increases practices like child labour, child marriage and other forms of rights violations.
- In the context of climate-related migration and displacement, children are acutely vulnerable. Climate change, for example, can lead to internal migration of families where children may be forced into labour. The disruptive effects of migration on family networks can be particularly harmful for young children in the age group of 0-3 years who are often left at home alone or in the care of young brothers and sisters while their parents seek or go to work (p. 4).

Climate change has a disproportionate impact on those people who are already facing chronic poverty and hunger. Currently two billion people live in countries where development outcomes are deeply affected by fragility, conflict and violence. Fragile contexts, for children, are some of the most dangerous places in the world. “Fragility can lead to conflict and violence, which in turn contribute to complex protracted crises” (World Vision, 2019, p. 3). “While the nature of such protracted crises is diverse in cause and effect, high levels

of food insecurity, hunger and child malnutrition are common features” (World Vision, 2019, p.3). Natural disasters and climate change, in these contexts, often aggravate existing vulnerabilities and/or cause new ones. It is projected that by 2030 the share of extreme poor living in fragile and conflict affected contexts will reach more than 80 per cent (World Vision, 2019). It is a matter of serious concern that in fragile contexts, those with a responsibility to care for children are unable or unwilling to do so (World Vision, 2019). As per a report, “poverty, conflict and discrimination against girls are putting more than 1.2 billion children-over half of children worldwide-at risk for an early end to their childhood” (Dutta, 2019, p. 1).

Climate Change and Children on the Move

Children are very vulnerable in the context of climate-related migration and displacement. The economic, social and environmental consequences of climate change could lead to migration and displacement of people. The adverse impacts of climate change leads to an increase in the migration of people. Again, in terms of displacement, climate change results in both international and internal displacement. Across the globe, millions of people have already been displaced by the climate impacts such as increased flooding and drought, stronger storms, sea level rise and so on. Save the Children data discloses that 50 per cent of the world’s displaced people are children, including those living as refugees (Save the Children, 2016). According to UNICEF, “we live in a mobile world in which at least 30 million children have moved across borders” (UNICEF, 2019, p. 11).

Child migration is a global reality. Children move out from home to escape violence, armed conflict and oppression, havoc created by climate change and natural disasters and poverty and inequality as well as to pursue their dreams for a better life. However, the reasons for their migration may change over time (UNICEF, 2017).

It may be mentioned that the status of children on the move may change at different points in the journey. When children migrate due to desperation, it can lead to migration of children without the required legal permissions which in turn makes them the so-called irregular migrants (UNICEF, 2019). The journey of these children becomes very risky particularly when they travel across deserts, oceans and armed borders encountering violence, abuse and exploitation on the way. Further, due to various reasons migrating children may also face problems in accessing essential services. Sometimes the host communities find it difficult to deal effectively with the increased demand. In some other situations, displaced children and their families may face discrimination on the basis of their status (Save the Children, 2016).

Save the Children (2018) stated that children face many risks when they are on the move. Some of these are as under (p. 8):

- Family separation
- Lack of appropriate care and risks of being placed in harmful institutions
- Injury, accidents, drowning when on route
- Harassment, corruption, violence and abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) by police, border officials, armed forces, civil groups, members of general public, and others
- Trafficking risks
- Deception and exploitation by smugglers
- Increased risks of coming into conflict with the law as they are perceived as criminals
- Incarceration in detention facilities (with increased risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse)
- Discrimination and lack of access to basic services
- Recruitment by armed forces and groups etc.

Impact of Climate Change on Children

“Climate change is the defining problem of the century” (Jaswal and Jolly, 2013, p. 45). It has varied impact from region to region. Among all sections of people, it is children who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. It is because of their less-developed physical and mental state children disproportionately suffers from the consequences of extreme climate and weather events. Girls, poor children, children on the move, indigenous children, minorities and children with disabilities, are first and worst-affected by climate change (CRN, 2019).

In their paper “Climate Change and Children’s Rights: An International Law Perspective” the authors have made some important points regarding the effects of climate change on children. Some of these are mentioned below (Schlichting et al., 2013, p. 352-353):

- Firstly, climate change put at risk the health of children. It is predicted that the health-related effects of climate change are heavily concentrated in poorer populations at low altitudes.
- Secondly, climate change in various ways also affects nutrition and food security.
- Thirdly, increasingly frequent and intense natural disasters also affect children directly. In events such as flooding, high winds and landslides the mortality rate among children is high. Children also

experience psychosocial disruption and emotional turmoil during these disasters which can have long-term implications for their health and well-being. Further, displacement and the actual separation of children from their parents or family members, as a result of natural disasters, deeply affect their emotional well-being.

In addition, climate change may affect children in some other ways too. To be specific, in poor countries of the world where child mortality is high (where health systems are already under pressure), there is a great possibility that these systems will become overstretched. Again, climate-induced migration and sudden natural disasters lead to displacement of people. This creates challenges for child protection. Further, the adverse impact of climate change on children's health, nutrition and general well-being places some added burdens on caregivers, typically women and girls.

Consequences of Climate Change

Initially climate change was thought of and considered to be an environmental challenge for the scientist and policy makers to respond. Later on, people came to know about the various social and economic impacts of changing climate in the form of loss of agricultural production, lack of accessibility to water, effect on health and livelihood and forced internal and external displacement (Jaswal and Jolly, 2013). Statistical data on the state of children in a changing climate brought into focus the sad reality that children belong to one of the most affected groups of individuals. Issues like human security, including food and health in-security, humanitarian crises, migration and child labour are some of the issues that potentially affect children most in the context of climate change.

Hanna and Oliva (2016), have mentioned about the various consequences of climate change. Some of these areas follows (p. 126):

- Climate change may exacerbate domestic violence and increase crime rates. It may also increase the probability of conflict and war.
- Economic stress from climate related disasters could lead to an increase in violent activities.
- Maternal stress from violence during pregnancy may lead to lower birth weight.
- There is also a link between poor financial condition and increased child transactional sex. Recent researches have showed that transactional sex and risky sexual behaviors among adult women increases when there is a loss of income. In contrary rising income reduces risky sexual activity in general among adolescent girls.

Climate change is a global issue. "Despite the catastrophic implications for children's rights posed by climate change, as well as the growing global movement of children and youth calling for ambitious climate action, recognition of children's rights barely feature in key international, regional and national decision-making frameworks related to climate change, including the Paris Agreement and workstreams under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)" (CRN, 2019, p. 2). "This oversight is a violation of the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), notably that the best interest of the child-as well as their right to be heard-should be primary considerations in any decision that affects them" (CRN, 2019, p. 2).

We know that children are the most valuable asset of any society. They should, therefore, be provided with proper care and protection for their overall growth and well-being. Obviously, some solutions are there for the difficulties that they face. However, without focussed strategies and collective action of the governments, private actors, civil society organizations etc. at all levels, it will not be possible to protect children in true sense.

Concluding Remarks

"The worst impacts of climate change are not inevitable" (UNICEF, 2015, p. 66). There are concrete steps that can be taken in order to safeguard our children from the life-threatening effects of climate change. All over the world efforts are being made by the governments of different countries to protect children from the adverse effects of climate change. Besides, numerous local, national as well as global agencies have also been putting effort towards protection of children from climate related hazards. Such efforts, however, many times seem to be less fruitful due to insufficient funds. Flexible funding, therefore, is of utmost importance for long term planning so that each and every child can be protected at any point of time and in any difficult situation.

The rights of children move with them where conflict or disaster, neglect, abuse or marginalization drive children to move (UNICEF, 2017). In this context it can be said that attention must be paid to the views, experiences and recommendations of children in order to respond to their requirements and support them before, during and after travel (Save the Children, 2012). Children belong to one of the least empowered groups of individuals in climate change policy-making and action (CRN, 2019). "Although international law with the holistic approach of the CRC leading the way provides a solid legal framework to protect children, children's rights remain at risk, not least because of the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms". "Participation and

access to justice are the key principles for child-sensitive policymaking, national adaptation planning and all forms of climate-smart (and child-friendly) development” (Schlichting et al., 2013, p. 374).

According to Schlichting et al. (2013), children are undoubtedly the victims of the adverse effects of climate change. However, presenting them only as resourceless victims is not accurate. Children have the ability to contribute towards responding to the adverse effects of climate change, if they are given the means to do so.

Lastly, it can be said that the quality environmental and climate change education is very essential for empowering children to protect themselves from climate-related threats and to exercise their rights to be heard on climate change policies and action.

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