



Background Note

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Childhood vulnerability to climate change in marginalised Vietnamese communities: the case for participation

By David Walker

Children are active agents in their families and communities but often lack basic knowledge of the factors that affect their wellbeing, as well as the means and understanding to influence these. One way of redressing this is to enable children to participate in various stages of the policy cycle in ways that enable them to address their wellbeing concerns. Barriers that prevent this from happening include a legacy of underappreciating the value (both intrinsic and rights based) of children's input into policy processes more generally. However, there are also obstacles more specific to the policy issue and sector – such as the degree of technical language and dialogue space afforded to children. These issues are all the more critical when considering the escalating disaster and climate risks that populations – children in particular – are exposed to.

Recent studies by Plan Viet Nam in association with the Social Development Programme at the Overseas Development Institute have been analysing the potential impact of climate change on the lives of ethnic minority and mountainous communities, particularly children and vulnerable groups in Quang Tri province. These studies aimed to understand the challenges facing people in marginalised areas to adapting and responding to climate change impacts, particularly by hear-

ing the voices of children themselves. They also aimed to identify areas where policy and programming spaces can be generated to secure greater participation of children to enhance planning and responses to climate change adaptation. This research is part of Plan International's work in nine provinces in central and northern Viet Nam, using its Child Centred Community Development approach with the aim to improve programmes in the area of maternal and child health, water and sanitation, early childhood and primary education, child protection, participatory governance, disaster risk management (DRM) and emergency response. In particular, Plan's DRM and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) strategy aims to ensure that children and youth grow up safely in resilient communities and that they are able to realise all their rights during emergencies.

The promotion of 'participatory approaches' in both humanitarian and development thinking and practice is hardly new, having become a widespread practice in the early 1990s (Chambers, 1994). Nevertheless, as an ambivalent term and process, effective 'participation' in practice remains a challenge: it is worth re-emphasising that participation can (and does) empower vulnerable and marginalised voices, but it also may legitimise and maintain unequal power relations (Cornwall and Brock, 2005).

In fact, for children in particular, participation continues to be an issue of central importance: children are affected by a constellation of factors

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that collectively put them in a position of relative vulnerability and voicelessness. These factors can include positions of exclusion and even exploitation at the household and community levels as a result of age and sex, combined with social and external vulnerability factors such as ethnicity, geographic location, social hierarchy and susceptibility to climate risk. Consequently, certain child populations face considerable challenges in articulating and taking action in their families, with their carers or within their community. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Viet Nam in 1990, asserts that children have a right to be heard in decision making that affects their lives (Articles 12 and 13), although climate policies in Viet Nam do not formally provide a space specifically for their concerns. In this sense, the 2002 UN World Fit for Children agreement, also endorsed by the Vietnamese government, provides discrete commitments regarding strengthening the individual capacities of children to inform a development agenda and respective outcomes.

Although it is more the exception than the rule that climate change-related studies consider the disaggregated specificities of children's positions in society (Bartlett, 2008), there is increasing recognition of the particular contribution a child-centred approach can make to strengthening community resilience to disaster risks. For instance, themes for International Day of Disaster Risk Reduction (13 October) have shifted from sector-oriented approaches – such as health care, microfinance and education in the mid to late 2000s – towards the Step Up initiative, which focuses on promoting the role of marginalised groups in disaster risk reduction – such as Children and Youth (2011), Women and Girls (2012), Ageing Populations (2013) and People with Disabilities (2014), as part of its annual campaigns leading up to the World Conference for Disaster Reduction in 2015.

Research Methodology

In order to generate greater evidence and to inform stakeholders' views on the necessary climate change adaptation interventions, a study mapping climate-related risks and vulnerability related to ethnic minority communities in Quang Tri province in Viet Nam was undertaken in 2011. This set the backdrop for conducting participatory research with girls and boys of differing ages together with their families, to better understand how they interact with climate-related risks, how they are affected in different spheres of their lives and how they currently prepare for or respond to these risks.

The study was conducted in eight communities in the western mountains of Quang Tri province. These were selected by Plan Viet Nam firstly on the basis that they were representative of mountainous ethnic minorities in central Viet Nam, but also to build on existing work with local government and communities in these localities. Within these contexts, the issue of 'vulnerability' was considered to be a function of 'sensitivity to hazards, exposure and adaptation options and coping responses, and is dependent on the probability of occurrence (likelihood) and magnitude of hazards (consequence)' (Plan, 2011: 18).

The study focused on a selection of 30 social vulnerability indicators (including household age structure, sex, child health, nutrition and education) established based on a review of secondary literature and evidence from district- and household-level surveys. These collectively generated five broad indices (see Table 1) consistent with the categories outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (Watson et al., 1998). An advantage of using such an approach in relation to a climate change vulnerability study is that it reduces the dependence on climate models that have hitherto been unable to provide projections relevant to planning at community level. On the other hand, as only two of the nine districts in Quang Tri province were selected, it is not feasible to directly extrapolate findings to provincial level or even to non-mountainous districts.

To complement the findings generated by the research, an associated study by Plan Viet Nam sought to examine in more detail the knowledge, attitudes and practices of children and young

Table 1: Social Vulnerability Indices

Index	Selected indicator
Population vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Total population – current and projected (2030, 2050) Population density, growth rate, age and sex structure, number of households
Poverty vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number and percentage of poor and near-poor households Dwelling, assets, endowments
Livelihoods vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livelihoods composition (diversity of occupations and streams) Productive assets
Social vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender inequality Child health and nutrition Child Education
Biophysical vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Soil, vegetation, microclimatic factors Proximity to hazards Land and water resources per capita

Note: These are sample indicators. In practice, each category consisted of four to seven indicators.

people with regard to climate change adaptation, comparing urban (Ha Noi) and rural (Quang Tri) settings. This study used desk reviews and participatory methods to consider the views of girls and boys within schools (typically aged nine to fourteen years), those of children in the same age group but outside formal schooling and those of school authorities and representatives of local government at district and commune levels.

Changing risks and child-specific vulnerabilities

In terms of relative risks, the broader Mekong region has been selected as one among a small handful of ‘global hotspots’ of climate-related vulnerability (USAID, 2010). Viet Nam ranks 23rd out of 193 countries considered vulnerable to harmful climate change, and has been categorised as one of 30 countries at ‘extreme risk’ (UN, 2012). Quang Tri province itself will be susceptible to increased temperatures, more floods during the wet season, more droughts during the dry season, associated impacts on agriculture and livelihoods and increased prevalence of tropical diseases, pathogens and pests (World Bank, 2010). Broadly speaking, these immediate and secondary impacts of climate change have aggravated the pre-existing high exposure to hazard in the province and the vulnerability of its population, particularly including that of future generations.

With respect to the vulnerabilities identified in Table 1, beginning with **population vulnerability**, household age structure already represents a major driver of vulnerability in two of the four areas. In these areas, children under 15 years constitute 60% of the population. Children therefore are not only currently a critical demographic, but, with high growth rates, also one that is likely to be increasingly relevant in policy and practice interventions. Indeed, this demographic will not only be disproportionately affected by future climate-related changes, but also will be key in mitigating and adapting to these changes.

Examining **poverty and social vulnerability**, district statistics show that all four communes are categorised as ‘poor’ (based on annual income ranking). Attendance in schools is high for early childhood (95% for ages seven to eleven years), with considerable dropouts for older cohorts (20-50% attendance for ages sixteen to eighteen years), as well as for girls (30-50% of girls do not complete primary school). A notable finding is the high incidence of malnutrition: 40-70%. Pairing these findings with dimensions of social vulnerability shows that Quang Tri’s ethnic groups (the Van Kieu and the Pa Co) experience greater expo-

sure to climate risks as a result of characteristics such as larger household size, age composition (larger number of children), lower adult literacy, gender dynamics within the household which generate more work burdens on girls and women, and lower levels of child nutrition.

Combining **livelihood and biophysical vulnerabilities**, the study demonstrates that all areas are heavily reliant on agriculture and natural resources, and are already experiencing stresses to their capacity to cope with current climatic variability:

‘I had to go the river to fetch water. Before I would go once or twice a month, or we could get water easily from the water flow gravity system. Now, during the dry season, water becomes less. I need to go to the river every two to three days. Each time, I need to bring back 10 cans [20 litres each] for my family.’

Girl in Dakrong district, Quang Tri province.

Mountainous communities are relatively isolated from services and markets, have limited natural resources in terms of topography and hydrology and are exposed to growing climatic extremes. As such, these marginalised communities will experience climate change in significantly varied ways compared with many other Vietnamese communities, and there will be a direct impact on the wellbeing of their children. The impacts on child labour are particularly indicative: participation of children in household labour is considered to be 10-40% in the area. Therefore, while data sources are limited, the critical concern is the degree to which labour-specific vulnerabilities will reach threshold levels as projected climate hazards and impacts arise in the coming decades – with implications for increased workload for girls and boys. This does not concern only on- and off-farm activities, but also non-farm labour, which could in turn be associated with migration, trafficking and sexual exploitation (Jasparro and Taylor, 2008) and have direct consequences for the protection and wellbeing of girls and boys.

Adaptive capacity and child rights

Having identified the importance of engaging children more generally in climate change adaptation, and having outlined the range of risks that can affect marginalised Vietnamese communities such as ethnic mountainous minorities, a question remains as to whether these risks are being sufficiently addressed in national and provincial planning/programme interventions, and how.

Each of the communities studied in Quang Tri had a ‘climate change committee’ in place that had the role of assisting in the development and implementation of adaptive or DRM activities at the local level. However, these committees could not demonstrate a clear and established strategy that explained how their community would adapt to, or mitigate, the local effects of climate change. Similarly, a lack of disaster risk-related planning initiatives was evident. In Dakrong commune, for instance, a location particularly vulnerable to flooding and landslides, only 20% of respondents declared any knowledge or awareness of disaster risk planning in their locality.

Unsurprisingly, the children interviewed in the study showed a limited understanding of the links between climate change and disaster impacts, including the relationships between deforestation, landslides and flash floods. The research identified that this was not because of a lack of involvement in and exposure to the risks themselves, but rather a result of a lack of consultation and involvement in DRM and CCA decision making at the most basic level.

The associated study examining child-specific knowledge, attitudes and practices relating to climate change adaptation in Ha Noi and Quang Tri echoes these findings. While almost 90% of children in urban Ha Noi are familiar with the basic concepts of climate change, just over half of children in rural Quang Tri recognise the issue. In both locations, the overarching source of climate change information is the television. However, the most telling variation is that seven in ten children in Ha Noi mentioned greenhouse gases (or similar) when unprompted on the issue, whereas less than 3% of children in Quang Tri used the same term.

Although similar prioritisation was made of climate change by urban and rural children, divergence exists on access to information and appropriate understanding of the issue. For instance, both the Ha Noi and the Quang Tri groups considered climate change important in relation to other national and global issues, whereas more than double the number of respondents in Quang Tri (68% compared with 32% in Ha Noi) declared that their knowledge on the subject was insufficient and needed strengthening.

In terms of localised practices relevant to climate change, children in Quang Tri were more vocal on the issue of disaster risk reduction and hygiene than their urban counterparts. Adaptation measures such as the establishment of community response teams, planning for disasters and constructing flood warning markers were prominent. Meanwhile, children from Ha Noi showed an aware-

ness of climate related issues, including clean energy, vaccinations and air pollution.

Responses from teachers in both contexts confirmed that the issues of climate change and disaster risk reduction were not yet part of the compulsory curriculum, nor were they significant components in existing lesson plans. Responses from a wider cohort of adults in both urban and mountainous areas were similar in that the majority considered these issues irrelevant to children. A minority recognised the importance of informing children of and preparing them for future circumstances:

‘It is a little bit difficult for children to participate in actions to respond to climate change because they are too small and do not understand much about the issue. But it is good to teach them about climate change so that they know about it and do the right things when they grow up.’

Parent in Thuan commune, Huong Hoa district, Quang Tri province.

Relevance to the Policy context

The evidence indicates that the province of Quang Tri is geographically and ethnically marginalised, and that child-specific vulnerabilities require increased responses through appropriate policy planning. One of the central policy requirements, however, is not necessarily the establishment of new relevant policy, but rather the implementation of and accountability to existing commitments. For instance, an assessment of the climate change policy context in Viet Nam shows that there are already over 200 laws and strategic commitments relating to climate change – with additional laws under consideration or being developed (ADMI and The Pressure Group Consultancy, 2011). Consequently, examining the linkages between national-level policy and local administrative units will be crucial.

In this respect, Viet Nam’s main disaster risk reduction framework, the National Strategy for Natural Disaster Prevention, Response and Mitigation to 2020 (the NDPRM-2020), can be used as a locus of accountability. The document recognises that children are a vulnerable demographic and supports the promotion of disaster risk management approaches in school curricula. Similarly, the National Target Program to Respond to Climate Change (NTP-RCC) commits to developing vulnerability and adaptation assessments on a number of scales and dimensions, including for vulnerable sectors – such as agriculture – but also for vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, women, the elderly and children. Furthermore, the Ministry

of Education and Training is currently developing plans to fully integrate climate change content into the educational curriculum as demonstrated in the Action Plan to Respond to Climate Change in the Education and Training Sector 2011-2015.

In addition to implementation concerns, decision makers need to consider evidence regarding the quality and quantity of child- and ethnicity-specific references within existing and emerging strategies and draft laws, including the degree to which they have secondary effects on children. For instance, while the NDPRM-2020 recognises children as a vulnerable demographic, it shows poor planning, resourcing and guidelines/mechanisms in relation to adequate representation of vulnerable groups at the local level. Similarly, the Pilot Program on Agriculture Insurance 2011-2013 does not explicitly consider ethnic minorities or women as having significantly varied inputs worthy of consideration – with both groups being responsible for the wellbeing of ethnically marginalised children with respect to nutrition, child labour and attendance and completion of schooling.

Related to the above, but important in its own right, is the degree to which child rights are addressed in climate-related policy. The NTP-RCC, the Community-based Disaster Risk Reduction Programme and the aforementioned Pilot Program on Agriculture Insurance all show negligible appreciation of rights-based language and commitments. This limited recognition of rights-based approaches can be attributed largely to the broader policy legacy and trajectory of the Vietnamese context, which has historically not valued universal rights principles. However, this does not negate the fact that windows of opportunity in relation to the promotion of rights do exist (UNICEF, 2004). For the moment, these opportunities are limited to the areas of economic rights and citizenship, but case studies do exist that demonstrate the associated development of social rights alongside economic rights (ibid.)

Consequently, in terms of concrete engagements that can actively promote the inclusion of ethnically marginalised children in national and subnational Vietnamese climate change policy planning and implementation, six actor-specific recommendations are offered:

- Government ministries (Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), Education and Training, Health, Agriculture and Rural Development and, critically, Finance) need to assess the degree to which facilities and incentives (such as shared performance indicators and crosscutting budget lines) exist for cross-sectoral collaboration on

disaster risk management and climate change policies that promote meaningful participation – both those concerning implementation and those related to initial formulation. Any initiatives should feed into UNCRC reporting mechanisms, commitments to the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response and Hyogo Framework for Action guidelines.

- Education systems – formal and non-formal – should focus on climate change’s social impact not just science, as well as the value of indigenous adaptation practices and the transfer of indigenous knowledge to new generations. Girls and boys both in urban and mountainous settings need to be granted greater access to relevant knowledge and skills for climate change adaptation.
- Think-tanks and research institutes, such as the Vietnamese Academy for Social Sciences, have a track record of vibrantly providing unique entry points for national policy promotion in an otherwise relatively closed ‘one-party’ system (Jones et al., 2011). Such actors should be included in both local and national research initiatives and relevant discussions in order to ‘translate’ child-relevant findings that more effectively bridge participatory research and policy.
- The non-governmental organisation community (e.g. through the work of the Climate Change Working Group, the Disaster Management Working Group and the Joint Advocacy Network Initiative) has been actively documenting activities, conducting research, piloting measures and promoting cooperation among different stakeholders (including promoting more cooperation with different government bodies) in response to climate change. These voices and influences have been growing in recent years, and this momentum can be garnered for national disaster risk reduction planning summits. However, they need to take into account a more child-centred approach to adaptation and the differentiated needs of children by age, sex, ethnicity and urban-rural contexts.
- Sources of public information, such as the media, schools, and local governments, among others, need to promote public awareness, public participation and public access to information on climate change. In particular, they need to provide access to more relevant and contextually specific climate change information at the local level, which can better ensure girls and boys gain the appropriate knowledge to adapt to a changing climate.

- The importance of existing local administrative structures – such as civil society organisations (communities climate change committees), as well as schools and other established social/political and economic groupings – cannot be underestimated in linking formal with informal structures. Such ‘systemic’ participatory processes can have particular policy relevance and application in one-party states (Oxfam, 2004). Adaptive capacities can hence be strengthened through building or enhancing child-sensitive considerations within these structures – particularly those in schools. The

critical factor here is focusing social impact relevant to the demographics’ of the disaster and climate exposed areas, and focusing on the importance of indigenous adaptation practices, knowledge transfer, and service responses that address the needs of vulnerable groups.

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