Reassessing Disaster and Emergency Management: A Child Rights Perspective

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Abstract

This paper delves into the critical yet often overlooked aspect of disaster and emergency management: the rights and needs of children. Recognizing that children form a vulnerable segment of society during disasters, this study seeks to evaluate how effectively their rights are being protected and implemented in such crises. Utilizing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as a framework, the research examines key disasters like Hurricane Katrina (2005) and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami to assess advancements and gaps in child-centric disaster response.

Our findings reveal that children's experiences and needs in disaster scenarios are complexly intertwined with socio-political and economic factors. Despite the ratification of child rights treaties by numerous countries, the actual execution of these rights in disaster situations varies significantly. The paper highlights that children's vulnerability is not just physical but extends to psychological and educational aspects, often exacerbated by inadequate disaster preparedness and response strategies.

The study emphasizes the importance of education in mitigating the psychological impact of disasters on children. Post-Hurricane Katrina initiatives, for instance, have shown the effectiveness of educational programs in disaster preparedness. However, challenges in coordination among NGOs and government entities often lead to ineffective implementation of child-focused disaster management strategies.

In conclusion, while strides have been made in recognizing and addressing children's needs in disasters, much work remains. The paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of child vulnerability and advocates for comprehensive strategies that prioritize children's rights in disaster management.

Keywords: Child Advocacy; Child Rights; Disaster Management; Emergency Preparedness; Vulnerability Assessment

Abbreviations: UN: United Nations; WHO: World Health Organisation; PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Introduction

The last few decades have shown an increase in the development of disaster and emergency management practices. With multiple plans and agencies in place to be activated, it is a wonder that gaps still exist in response and mitigation efforts. A society is made of multiple key players. Amongst the most vulnerable and often least acknowledged members of society are the children. In 1924 a draft on the Declaration on the Rights of the Child was created, which conveys that everyone is responsible for ensuring children's

rights with regards to "means of development; special help in times of need; priority for relief; economic freedom and protection from exploitation; and an upbringing that instils social consciousness and duty [1]. For the purposes of this paper a microscope will be placed on the statement, "special help in times of need" [2]. In today's world, disasters are a common occurrence that afflict both affluent and struggling countries. Disaster and emergency management plans and agencies have developed to support societies in mitigation and resiliency efforts. The term child will be defined as any person who is under the age of 18 [2]. This paper aims to explore questions surrounding children's rights. Are children's rights being implemented and protected? To what extent are they upheld and executed? What hinders children's rights from being upheld? These questions will be explored by examining various disaster and emergency situations that occurred within the last two decades. Amongst the disasters to be studied are that of Hurricane Katrina 2005 and the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquakes and Tsunami. The study hypothesizes that children's rights have developed over the course of the last two decades in part largely to these two horrific tragedies the developments that have occurred do not yet begin to properly cover the "rights" of the children that are to be met by "all". Issues surrounding mitigation efforts and immediate recovery are often influenced by various factors such as family dynamic, socioeconomic status, race, and education.

Problem Description and Analysis

Issues surrounding children's rights and their implementation are often interwind with political, economic, and social values present in the affected state. The aftermath of disaster implementation efforts regarding children are crucial in that they play a significant influence on children's psychological, physical, and educational vulnerability [3]. The following section will shed light on the above issues.

Children's rights have been developing steadily since 1924. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 by the United Nations (UN) to establish global standards by which to ensure children's rights to protection, survival, and development without discrimination. Globally 194 countries have ratified the treaty and are therefore held accountable for it [4]. As such, each country has varying degrees of accountability toward children to uphold. Children amongst those that are most vulnerable in times of disaster both in physical effects WHO [5] and psychological effects [6]. When examining fatalities post disaster, both impact-related and in the immediate aftermath children account for 30-50% of disaster survivors world-wide [6]. Reasons of death are often affected by hazard impacts such as drowning or burns or consequences of the aftermath of disaster such as respiratory conditions [7]. Children who survive the

impact and immediate aftermath of a disaster often have to continue to develop and deal with life even though they are often unequipped to do so successfully. Children's lack of experience and available resources make them especially susceptible and vulnerable to lasting psychological impacts Schonfeld, et al. These can range from anxiety, mental health disorders, academic failure [8]. Being that disasters occurrences are more frequent and intense in nature; it is of utmost importance to recognize what factors affect children's vulnerability and establish effective ways to maintain the rights of children as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There are a multitude of hurdles in trying to achieve a true application of children's rights. While certain countries have some policies in place, the ability to execute once a disaster occurs is uncertain. One of the issues surrounding children and children's well-being, and levels of resiliency and preparedness is that they are not a lone entity. They are often linked to the parents or caregivers' level of preparedness. This can be seen in various levels of socio-economic status, readiness kits/ plans, and actions with which the guardians take and implement. Not only are children's levels of survival often linked to guardian preparedness but also the resiliency level of parents is directly linked to positive or negative levels of resiliency in children [8]. If a parent is anxious, stressed, depressed, and mentally distressed, this is often reflected in the children of the household. Thus, it should be a priority to ensure proper guidelines are in place, and educational systems are established that could help provide guidance, as it has been proven that education is key in reducing anxiety and psychological trauma in children [9].

Education is key in mitigation efforts. Research shows that children who have been exposed to mitigation and resiliency programs have a better chance of being physically, emotionally, and psychologically aware and ready to deal with hazards [10]. Having educational programmes in place helps families be more prepared for disasters. The educative efforts add to children's understanding and decrease in fear of hazards [8]. Post Hurricane Katrina, much effort was poured into educative ideas and programs, which led to the creation of applications with games to help illustrate and educated children and youth on certain disaster preparedness methods and helplines [11].

Children not only suffer from lack of effective educative efforts in certain nations but also the lack of coordination. Often when disaster strikes nations that are suffering from high poverty rates, large scale problems follow. Many times, NGO's will flock to a disaster struck region and lack of coordination between government entities and NGO's will lead to confusion surrounding laws and could result in a doubling of efforts [12]. The ability of NGO's to properly

help and effectively take part in the post disaster care is an issue regardless of the NGO's presence in economically prosperous countries versus countries with struggling economies [13].

Seeing children as an entity in and of themselves is a newer concept. Examples of such can be seen in when the return to "normal" societies focus on rebuilding, reunification, and reconstruction efforts. Often children's voices are nowhere to be heard. It is recently being presented that children could be the best to advocate for themselves [14]. Children's voice in pre- and post-disaster efforts is critical in ensuring children's safety. Whether hearing their voice in policy making ideas or through providing children with outlets to advocate or report abuse occurring to them is a fundamental right which should not disappear in times of vulnerability [15].

Literature Review

Questioning why disaster recovery efforts are not highlighted in a larger degree and their adverse results can be seen through peek L, et al. [3] analysis, which considers children's experiences during disaster times and the resulting effects. Peek L, et al. [3] argues that there are 5 reasons why children's experiences are important to keep in mind. The first being that children are highly vulnerable, both physically and emotionally. The younger the child the more dependent on a parent, the youth may suffer from behavioral, psychological, and emotional issues post disaster. Secondly, being aware of children's needs is of utmost importance. It is often though that younger children's needs are met when parents' needs are met. That is not often the case as children's needs are different than those of adults. Often children are unable to articulate their distress and thus need help in advocating for the rights of feeling safe and secure. According to Silverman and La Gereca, et al. [16], disasters affect children's personal growth and development, as it not only impacts their daily routines but can expose them to prolonged periods of disturbed education, dysfunctional family frameworks leading to a break in social development, and increased exposure to stressful situations, such as alcoholism, physical abuse, and drug abuse.

Disasters expose children to events and situations that could affect their physical and emotional health in ways that hinder their presence and proper function in society. Peek L, et al. [3] also highlights that through children's vulnerability, there are rays of hope as children, "are not passive victims" (p.4). Thus, highlighting that though children are at risk they also have agency in that they can take an active role in pre disaster preparations. The more efforts placed on providing educational material and gateways pre-disaster the more helpful it can be to children's self-esteem, as they will feel

power through knowledge. Children are also able to help with planning efforts. Often children are not addressed in pre-disaster plans. This is a mistake, as children need to be heard and not just listened to Bartlett [17]. Examples of this can be seen in 2001 El Salvador earthquake where children helped with reconstruction efforts and identifying ways to help with reconstruction efforts [18].

Grover, et al. [19] proposes a slightly different perspective on the concept of child resilience. Grover, et al. [19] illustrates the concept of advocacy for the child *by* the child (p.527). Grover points out that children acting and functioning in society does not necessarily mean that children have overcome their experiences and have gone through the proper healing channels. Furthermore, it is highlighted that the level of coping waivers from time to time and is not set at a constant state. Through a field study conducted in Guatemala it was found that children are often more willing to advocate and speak up for other children than themselves. Guatemala has a system in place which allows children to file a '*denuncia*' or human rights complaint (p. 530). Now, this field of study proved to show a complexity in the concept of advocacy amongst children. Children affected were often burdened by cultural thoughts and perspectives surrounding their plight. Often not viewing themselves as worthy to be saved and thus taking the suffering as a form of retribution or deserved punishment. Often those same individuals who were so quick to dismiss themselves would come to the rescue of others as witnesses. Other issues surrounding this includes fear of retaliation from a more powerful oppressor, harmful social ideas such as not wanting to complain as "woman do" or wanting to maintain the macho facade. The concept of appearing competent and capable to others is often a way in which children act in order to function within society [20]. Other issues surrounding children advocating for themselves is being ostracized from their peers. In Goody AS, et al. [21] study it was found that children who filed complaints and advocated for themselves were often the children that still had contact with family. Accordingly, highlighting the concept that those with extended support and "proper" social backgrounds who can help with financial and emotional support are often more successful in advocating for themselves. Raftree L, et al. [22] argues that children have 'personal agency' and are capable of thinking and caring for themselves under certain circumstance.

A major issue surrounding children's self-advocacy is that adults often times misunderstand this action. Interpreting it from an adult perspective rather than viewing children's action through an adult lens, which leads to the problem of support. Often children's voice and efforts are suppressed as they don't fit into the organized adult spaces, or does not fit adult agenda [19]. Furthermore, Grover, et al. [19] illustrates that for child advocacy to be effective and

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accepted it must be endorsed by adults. Once adults embrace child advocacy by the child, they help strengthen children's resiliency and recovery efforts.

Todres, et al. Emphasizes the lack of coordination between varying entities in securing children's rights post disaster. In the immediate aftermath of disasters there is frequent confusion and destruction of resources that would otherwise be available to use. The confusion surrounding responsibility coupled with media images often leads to misrepresentation in the media. Due to images of destruction and the powerful images of children in distress responding individuals often times 'overlook the agency of survivors' and view their efforts as noble (p. 1236). The rescue narrative leads to many issues including the concept of viewing survivors as "passive" people without agency. In the 2010 Haiti relief efforts, a group of American individuals came to Haiti and took it upon themselves to transport 33 Haitian children to the Dominican Republic [23]. This led to the arrest of the group on charges of child trafficking. This issue in and of itself highlights that though the Haitian government had strict laws on place trying to stop child trafficking they did not consider the rescue narrative and the effects it has in creating individuals who see themselves as "saviors" of the poor afflicted survivors. This case tends to highlight the view that children are seen as passive individuals versus people who have rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which should be upheld during this time. Allowing children to have a voice to advocate and participate in reconstruction efforts themselves.

In 2010 when Haiti was stuck by an earthquake its devastating effects could be seen all over the country. Haiti's population is 45% children which should have accounted for a focused effort and view in the reconstruction efforts Todres, et al. Instead, children were not the focus of the country's reconstruction efforts. Though UNICEF and other NGOs focused on the children the efforts the main entity which should have protected children's rights did not act accordingly. Children's vulnerability in Haiti was already present before the 2010 earthquake. This disaster struck a country already dealing with problems of an impoverished economy, prominent child trafficking activity and inadequate law enforcement [24].

The governments strong rules on child trafficking did not save all children from sexual abuse. Thus, depriving them of living in safety and dignity. This was illustrated in the case of a 10-year-old girl who was raped multiple times a day throughout her camp experience. Due to reconstruction efforts being weak, lack of proper government coordination, and safe housing environments many children were forced to live in situations that clearly violated their rights as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child [2].

The 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami was devastating to multiple countries. Amongst the worst hit was that of Banda Aceh, Indonesia which compromised 35% of Indonesian casualties [25]. This was in part due to the political unrest between the province of Banda Aceh and the Indonesian government [26]. This same political unrest lead to time sensitive relief effort issues. NGOs were not allowed to access the province immediately leading to a delayed response and extended level of exposure to unsanitary conditions. During the recovery time, a significant amount of effort was placed on controlling contamination of the water supply [27]. In 2012, a practice run of sorts occurred when a earthquake struck which revealed that even though the society had placed new safety structures, and early warning system, and facilities in place the post-traumatic stress which individuals experienced created a mass panic and no adherence to any guidelines put forth. Officials left their post leaving safety structures locked and unattended. Many panicked causing traffic jams all throughout the city [25]. All due to a lack of proper education on disaster protocol. This incident illustrated the high PTSD rate not only found in children but also in society [28]. This incident also illustrated that even with the establishment of three organizations, "The Ministry of Education, for schools and universities, the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, for operational and rehabilitative academies, and the National Disaster Warning Center" these resources were not enough to stop mass chaos during the 2012 incident [29].

Hurricane Katrina 2005 highlighted an enormous number of issues surrounding child planning in disaster and emergency situations. Amongst most important is the concept of reunification. In all disasters that have occurred there has been a time period in which children are separated from their families. This separation leads to confusion and heightening of anxiety, leading to further PTSD development [28]. The suddenness of the situation coupled by the lack of identified and clear leadership, and coordination between responding groups lead to delayed findings. People often went missing for days where individuals were unsure if they were alive or dead. Upon evacuation of certain centers, this often lasted for weeks. While NGO's such as American Red Cross would try and reunite children with their primary caregivers a lack of movement on the state's ability to identify and process dead or lost individuals was experiencing delays [30]. The Katrina situation helped illustrate how lack of coordination between varying entities untimely results in the lack of ability to uphold children's rights in a timely manner if at all in times of emergency.

Discussion and Recommendations

Are children's rights being upheld in societies before, during, and after disasters? This question is directly linked

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to the concept of vulnerability. Amongst the most vulnerable sectors in society are its children. There are multiple steps that need to be taken in any society which hopes to uplift the rights of the child during times of disaster.

The first step in reducing vulnerability in children is to acknowledge that it exists. It is important to identify that children are part of society. They are the future, and their current experiences affect their ability to take effective roles in society. It must be recognized that children have less resources available and a limited ability to prepare for disaster. As such, it results in children disproportionately at a disadvantage during a disaster. Children are more vulnerable and at risk to suffer injury or death during a disaster situation. Psychological trauma can be shorter or longer in the post disaster period [31]. Children are at higher risk of increased suffering in hospitals. Their suffering is often increased due to terrible and uncoordinated planning efforts and decisions which lead to longer recovery times. Special consideration should be taken into caring for children's emotional, educational, psychological and physiological state during the disaster time period. Emergency response teams should be aware of the variables that afflict the young and act accordingly in the healing process as factors that affect children's vulnerability levels. Disaster and emergency personnel, law makers across all levels of government should be presented with information on children's needs in disaster time periods and learn from previous mistakes. The disaster planning groups in any region should learn to account for the most vulnerable in society and not merely lump children's needs under family needs Bartlett S, et al. [17]. Rather keeping in mind that children's needs are often different than other groups post disaster.

The second step is the recognition that vulnerability differs amongst children and creating a plan to properly help all children at risk. Depending on a child's age, race, gender, physical and mental capabilities, geographic location (as certain areas are higher risk than others), housing situation pre disaster (living in a shelter, with family, orphanage etc..) and family structure (single parent, grandparents, family unit are present) are all factors in determining children's risk levels, and their experiences post disaster [3]. These factors are critical in determining whether children will be prepared for disaster, receive warnings regarding disasters, take protective action, access aide and facilities provided and whether they will completely recover from the trauma which they have experienced. Thus, transitioning from a state of vulnerability to resilient state. As the definition of a child includes all those under the age of 18 [2], it is also of significance to note that children's age is a major factor in vulnerability. Children under five are more susceptible to death and helplessness as they often rely on adults to help with their basic needs. Children older than six years of age

have differing abilities, they are still at high risk but their ability to have personal agency is much higher than the younger age group [32]. The ability to identify risk factors amongst children is important as it helps give all children an equal chance at survival, providing the necessary care and resources to those who truly need it in the recovery process. Through the combined and correlated efforts of NGO's and disaster management personnel a successful distribution of resources maybe achieved.

Thirdly, and highly important is to create institutional awareness and educative plans for children and the institutions which cater to them. Research and statistics surrounding Hurricane Katrina, 2004 Tsunami, and various other disasters indicate that institutions which serve children should be better equipped and educated to serve children in times of need [28]. Hospitals did not begin to have plans geared specifically toward children in disaster response scenarios until 1995 and they were only later reviewed in 2000 [33]. It is highly important that staff in education facilities such as schools, daycares, orphanages, and shelters take specific measures to ensure basic needs are met. The first measure which should be taken is the preparation of educative material that are presented to children and staff on a regular basis providing an informed breakdown of emergency action plans. Secondly, a proper emergency plan should be created which considers the varying bodies which are responsible for child response efforts and establish proper leadership guidelines and working channels. This is to ensure that efforts are not duplicated, and that resources and funds are allocated properly. Thirdly, institutions should ensure that the physical state of their facilities is safe, for example unbolted bookshelves should be bolted down to prevent, older buildings should maintain adherence to state codes.

Lastly, provide opportunities for children to take part and be involved in disaster preparation plans. Children should be considered a strength and asset to families, communities, and organizations in all phases of disaster response. Children should be given an active voice in planning as they are the experts on themselves [3]. They possess the unique perspectives of what vulnerabilities face their specific community or family. Providing the children with a voice in the pre disaster phase will help ensure an active role on their part in proper knowledge of safety precautions, stronger advocacy post disaster and more informed evacuation and post disaster response efforts. Preparing and educating children about disaster allows them some control over in an unpredictable situation [11].

The above suggestions are guidelines to help reduce children's vulnerability during disasters. They have begun to be employed such as the case with the National Commission

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on the Children and disasters: 2010 report to the president and congress. The publication of applications which can be downloaded on phones and educational programs written into school policies [34-36]. All of this though does not mean true progress until proper evaluations and accountability can be taken to ensure that the new measures are being enforced. Creating an accountability system to review educational output, accessibility of educational material and application of that material must occur to ensure that children's rights are being upheld to the highest standards in disaster situations.

Conclusion

Children's rights in disaster situations are a factor that is taken into considerations. Great strides have been taken in the last two decades to create and implement mitigation and resiliency plans amongst various populations. Nonetheless, there are many factors to consider when trying to ensure that children's rights are being met. A complicated path lies ahead for many nations regardless of their high or low economic status. Those nations that are plagued by financial distress need to ensure a coordination effort between NGOs to ensure proper execution of recovery efforts. All nations need to create more accessible educational material to their residents/citizens. Even though children are to be considered entities in and of themselves, often times due to the concept of a "family unit" the success of safety efforts is directly linked to social status. Children belonging to a family unit have an advantage over those who are orphaned. This is due to children relying on and being heavily influenced by the family's efforts pre and post disaster. Those who belong to specific socio-economic backgrounds or of a specific race will fair differently than others as was illustrated through Hurricane Katrina 2005 studies and statistics. Political stability plays a role in accessibility and execution of disaster preparedness material and response as could be seen in the case of Banada Aceh, Indonesia post 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami. Each nation should have a plan that includes a reunification process, access to clean facilities, a home, running water and education. Children are amongst the most vulnerable in our societies, and a society can only be as strong as its weakest link. Creating societies that value children and children's rights as separate entities which need care and attention provide children with the ability to live a safe respectable life as outlined by the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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