



Children on the move in the context of climate change in South Asia

A review of literature and report on consultations held in
Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka

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Acronyms

ACD	The Association for Community Development
COP	Conference of Parties (a major international meeting on climate change)
CSID	Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
NGO	No-Governmental Organisation
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WB	World Bank
VOC	Voice of Children

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Introduction

Climate change is having a major impact on the lives of children and their communities across South Asia. Family for Every Child member organisations in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka have noted that climate change is increasing the number of children on the move, and is augmenting their vulnerability to a range of threats to their survival, protection and wellbeing. Family's South Asian members intend to undertake in-depth research, advocacy and learning exchanges in relation to these concerns. This report is a preliminary step in that process; it has been developed to inform future directions and decisions on next steps. Its audience is internal but its contents could be adapted for an external audience. It is based on a light-touch review of the global and regional literature, and on research in each of the four countries (see Annexe 1). Members also carried out interviews and group discussions with policy makers, practitioners, children and families (see Annexe 2). Insights and findings from these consultations are incorporated in this report.

The report is divided into five sections.

- 1. Conceptualising children's movement in the context of climate change** explores trends in movement induced by climate change in South Asia, and examines the different types of climate change-related child movement. This section also looks at debates about the extent to which movement can be viewed as a positive adaptation to climate change. It explores how these debates might relate to child migration, considering both the positive and negative impacts of this movement.
- 2. The impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities in South Asia** examines the impacts of climate change on exposure to slow and rapid onset emergencies, conflict, and economies.
- 3. The impact of climate change on children's movement** examines the effects of climate change on the drivers of children's movement and the numbers and categories of children on the move. It also explores the impact of climate change on the vulnerability of children on the move.
- 4. Responses to children on the move in the context of climate change** examines several options for responding to the drivers and effects of climate change-induced movement of children.
- 5. Conclusion** summarises key findings, and suggests options for next steps for Family for Every Child in its efforts to better understand and address how climate change is impacting the vulnerability of children in South Asia, and the four member countries specifically, in this report.

Conceptualising children's movement in the context of climate change

Global increases in movement as a result of climate change

Children's movement in South-Asia takes place in the context of global increases in the movement of adults and children as a result of climate change. In their latest report, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)¹ notes that climate change is increasing migration. United Nations (UN) agencies further warn that climate change is already leading to a global rise in children on the move, with 7.3 million children displaced by natural disasters alone in 2021.²

¹ IPCC 2023

² UNHCR et al 2023

Types of children's movement related to climate change

The literature reviewed for this report suggests that climate change is inducing multiple, often overlapping, forms of children's movement,³ including:

- **Sudden displacement of children** is an abrupt form of movement, caused by natural disasters such as flooding or a cyclone, or the imminent threat of such disasters, which force children and families away from their homes. Children may move with their families, or move alone as a result of becoming separated from them in the chaos surrounding the emergency.
- **Planned relocation of communities** involves entire communities moving to a safer and more sustainable location with their assets. For example, if homes are at threat from river erosion, or if agriculture is no longer viable due to water shortages.
- **Planned migration of children with their families** is usually from rural to urban areas, but sometimes from one rural area to another. This movement may be the result of slower onset emergencies, such as gradually increasing temperatures or progressively variable rainfall. It may also occur after a series of sudden onset disasters that have progressively diminished household resilience over time. It is usually motivated by a desire to improve household livelihoods, or gain access to services that have been disrupted by climate change-induced effects.
- **Child migration for work without families** may also be the result of slower onset emergencies, such as droughts, or a series of sudden onset disasters. It may be motivated by a desire to find work, or escape stress and violence in the home that has been exacerbated by the effects of climate change. This type of movement is often preceded by damage to educational infrastructure. Children may choose to move independently or be encouraged to do so by families. These children may end up living and working on the streets and may be engaged in harmful child labour.
- **Child trafficking** occurs for similar reasons to child migration, but involves a 'trafficker' who assists in the movement of the child for the purpose of exploitation. In some contexts, entire families are trafficked for work.⁴
- **Movement for marriage** involves children, nearly always girls, leaving their families to reside with a spouse, often with in-laws.
- **Movement to live with extended family or wider kinship networks (kinship care)** involves children being sent to live with kin when parents have died or can no longer care for them as a result of the slow and rapid onset effects of climate change.⁵

Movement may take place within or across borders, and may be temporary for a few days or weeks, seasonal, or long term. Children's movement can be viewed as being on a spectrum from voluntary to forced. At one end of this spectrum, children have free choice to move without any constraints in their decision making. At the other end, children are forced to move against their will, for example by being kidnapped by traffickers. Even seemingly voluntary movement may be made in the context of increasingly constrained choices in climate change-affected communities.⁶

³ UNICEF 2022b; ILO 2023b; Rashid 2020; Bharadwaj, R et al (2021); IOM 2016; Kinship care guidelines

⁴ US state department 2023b

⁵ Kinship care guidelines

⁶ UNICEF and IOM 2022; ILO 2023b

In addition, there may be communities or individuals who would like to move, but cannot. These ‘trapped’ individuals, families and communities may be unable to move for a variety of reasons and may face a range of threats to their survival, protection and wellbeing as a result.

Parents and other caregivers may also move without children as a result of climate change. This type of movement is examined later in this report as a driver of children’s movement in some contexts.

Children who move for other reasons, such as war or conflict, may also be affected by the impacts of climate change at their destination.

Movement as adaptation?

The literature on migration in the context of climate change includes extensive debates on the extent to which this movement can be seen as a positive response to its threats and impacts.⁷ Recognition of movement related to climate change was initially framed in terms of ‘climate refugees,’ with a focus on threats to national security and limited consideration of migrant wellbeing.⁸ In opposition to this negative view of climate change-related movement, the concept of ‘migration as adaptation’ has been increasingly used by agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the IPCC.⁹ These groups argue that climate change-related migration should be seen as an often proactive and positive response to hazards, whilst also acknowledging that some movement can increase vulnerability.¹⁰ Movement can allow those affected to escape from the worst impacts of climate change, send remittances to climate change-affected communities, and learn new skills to adapt to its effects.¹¹

Agencies working on child migration and climate change also highlight the potential for this movement to benefit children. For example, UNICEF and IOM argue that children’s movement, while carrying risks, can protect children from harm.¹²

In recent years, the migration as adaptation paradigm has also been challenged. Commentators caution against a simplistic, positive vision of climate change-induced migration for five key reasons. First, it is argued that such a focus fails to adequately acknowledge the lack of options open to those experiencing the effects of climate change, many of whom are forced away from homes and communities with little notice or choice.¹³ Rather than adaptive migration, this form of movement is said to be more accurately referred to as ‘survival migration.’¹⁴

Second, framing climate change-induced migration as adaptation does not recognise that movement may fail to reduce vulnerabilities, and in some cases can make the lives of climate migrants worse.¹⁵ For example, migration can lead to cultural dislocation or to a range of extreme challenges that accompany life in slums.¹⁶ Such migration is sometimes referred to as ‘maladaptive migration.’¹⁷

⁷ Vinke et al 2020

⁸ Vinke et al 2020

⁹ Vinke et al 2020; IPCC 2023; ILO 2023b

¹⁰ Vinke et al 2020; IPCC 2023; ILO 2023b

¹¹ IPCC 2023; Rizal et al 2022; ADB 2012

¹² UNICEF and IOM 2022

¹³ Vinke et al 2020

¹⁴ Vinke et al 2020

¹⁵ Vinke et al 2020; Rana and Alina 2021

¹⁶ Climate action network 2021; Hansen and MacDonald 2021

¹⁷ Vinke et al 2020

Third, the migration as adaptation paradigm tends to centre on migrants themselves, and may fail to consider the impacts of widespread climate change-related migration on rapidly expanding cities, or on the families and communities ‘left behind’ by migrants.¹⁸

Fourth, an overly positive view of migration can deter efforts to reduce the necessity of migration, including tackling the impacts of climate change in migrants’ home communities.¹⁹

Finally, celebrating migration as a mechanism to adapt to climate change can shift the responsibility for responding to climate change away from societies and governments and towards individuals and households.²⁰

It is further argued that viewing migration as adaptation to climate change simplifies a complex phenomenon, with research indicating that climate change is often one of many causes of migration.²¹

These debates suggest that a full exploration of children’s movement in the context of climate change requires a balanced consideration of the benefits and disadvantages of this movement on the child, their family and community, and on the communities they migrate to. This approach must recognise that children’s rights and vulnerabilities are different from those of adult migrants and should acknowledge that the impacts of children’s movement vary by factors such as age, gender, disability, belonging to discriminated against or marginalised groups or communities, and the precise set of circumstances that have required or compelled children to leave their homes. Special consideration needs to be given to movement that leads to separation from families, particularly if children are left outside of any adult care. Such movement is likely to lead to particular increases in children’s vulnerability.

Exploring the causes of children’s movement requires an examination of the degree of children’s agency and choice in decisions to move. It is vital to understand what their motivations for movement are, the pragmatic decisions they make in the face of constrained choices, and their desires and aspirations for the future. Any efforts to understand the role of climate change in movement must consider all of the factors that affect movement, and how these may or may not intersect with climate change.

Finally, it is important to consider the ramifications of children’s movement on broader climate change strategies. For example, in relation to the emphasis that should be placed on protecting the rural or coastal communities that children migrate from versus improving life in the cities for child migrants. Evidence on children’s movement may also be used to motivate action to reduce carbon emissions.

The impacts of climate change on vulnerable communities in South Asia

Climate change is having a significant impact on the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities across South Asia, including in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Evidence suggests that the nature and severity of impact varies greatly between and within countries, depending on geography,

¹⁸ Rana and Alina 2021

¹⁹ Vinke et al 2020

²⁰ Vinke et al 2020

²¹ Rana and Alina 2021

the resources available to individuals, families and communities, and the effectiveness of government responses. Climate change experts in all four countries interviewed for this report also pointed out the unpredictable nature of climate change-induced impacts, making it hard to plan from one season or year to the next. Examples of impacts include:

- **Sea level rises affecting coastal communities.** Two thirds of Bangladesh is less than five meters above sea level, making it highly vulnerable to the rising sea levels associated with climate change.²² A combination of storm surges and rising sea levels is leading to the salination of water supplies and agricultural land.²³ The Sundarbans in both India and Bangladesh are experiencing one of the fastest rates of sea level rise globally, which is causing coastal erosion and land loss, flooding of low-lying areas and submersion of islands, forcing inhabitants to relocate.²⁴
- **Extreme weather events such as cyclones, storms, floods and landslides.** In Bangladesh, cyclones, storm surges, floods, excess rainfall, and heatwaves have all been exacerbated by climate change.²⁵ In Nepal, floods have doubled in recent years and caused the most damage out of all of the climate change-related hazards. Glacial melt and excess rainfall have also led to landslides.²⁶ Floods, storms and landslides are also increasing in frequency in Sri Lanka and²⁷ India is also experiencing extreme weather events.
- **Drought.** In Nepal, dry spells and droughts affect water supply to households, forest fires, pests and diseases, crop yields and hydroelectricity.²⁸ Drought affects agricultural production in Bangladesh²⁹ and parts of Sri Lanka, including Anuradhapura.³⁰
- **Extreme temperatures.** Temperatures are rising in Sri Lanka, where projections based on continued high emission scenarios show increases of 2.9-3.5°C by 2090.³¹ Projected rises are expected to drive ambient temperatures over 30°C on a far more routine basis, and to greatly increase the regularity of temperatures over 35°C. Heatwaves are also common in India, Bangladesh and in the low-lying Terai region of Nepal.³²
- **Conflict.** For example, in Bangladesh climate change has been associated with inflaming communal conflicts as resources become more scarce.³³ In Nepal, Sri Lanka and India, climate change experts interviewed for this report highlighted the high risk of conflict over resources, particularly water.
- **Impact on economies.** Without any action, by 2040 the land available for growing crops in Bangladesh could shrink by 6.5 percent nationally and by as much as 18 per cent in the south of the country.³⁴ Average annual losses from tropical cyclones are already at USD \$1 billion per year,

²² UNICEF 2019

²³ UNICEF 2019.

²⁴ UNEP no date;

²⁵ Hansen and Macdonald 2021, Save the Children 2024, UNICEF 2019, Huq et al 2024.

²⁶ WB 2022a

²⁷ World Bank 2021

²⁸ WB 2022a; Climate change network 2021

²⁹ Cited in UNICEF 2019 p.16

³⁰ Primary data collected by FIRD in July 2024.

³¹ World Bank 2021

³² Kagawa 2022/ WB 2022/ climate action network 2021; Huq et al 2024; Save the Children 2024

³³ Hansen and MacDonald 2021

³⁴ WB 2022b

which represents 0.7 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In Nepal, climate change has already led to an average loss of 0.08 per cent of GDP per year.³⁵ The Asian Development Bank predicts that Nepal will suffer sustained losses of 2.2% of its annual GDP due to climate change impacts by 2050.³⁶ Likewise, in both India and Sri Lanka, rising food prices due to reduced agricultural production are negatively impacting household food consumption.³⁷ Economic modelling predicts further negative consequences if climate change continues.³⁸

The impacts of climate change vary greatly by factors such as age, gender, disability and geography.³⁹ Global evidence is clear that children are more susceptible to the health impacts of climate change than adults, a fact revealed by recent evidence from Nepal, where it is estimated that 3200 children die, are injured or go missing as a result of disasters each year.⁴⁰ Children are also more likely to suffer from climate change-related diseases.⁴¹

Girls are especially at risk of the negative impacts of climate change in some communities.⁴² For example, in Nepal they are more likely to be injured, go missing or be killed by climate change-related disasters.⁴³ Girls are responsible for water collection, which increases in times of drought, and increases threats to their security as they walk sometimes long distances.⁴⁴ As household incomes fall, girls receive less food and miss out on schooling.⁴⁵ It is also more common for girls than boys to be married at a young age due to the effects of climate change such as increased household poverty and lack of access to formal education.⁴⁶ Focus group discussions with adults and children in Sri Lanka and India asserted that climate change has exacerbated the drivers of child marriage and has increased the rate of marriage of girls age 14 +. These findings are in keeping with evidence from elsewhere in South Asia and around the world.⁴⁷

Children in more remote areas may also be at greater risk of experiencing the negative impacts of rapid and slow onset disasters caused by climate change. The children consulted for this paper in Nepal argued that aid takes far longer to reach remote mountainous communities after emergencies than urban areas. Experts interviewed in the Sundarbans region of India also asserted the heightened vulnerability to hunger and other health risks faced by children in hard-to-reach areas.

Evidence from Bangladesh shows the particular challenges that children and adults with disabilities face in climate change-related emergencies. Whilst some progress has been made in including disability issues in policies on climate change adaptation in Bangladesh, limited efforts have been made to put these policies into practice.⁴⁸ Evidence suggests that persons with disabilities have less

³⁵ Gov of Nepal / CR Council 2023:

³⁶ Cited in Rizal, S, Magar, K and Bhatarai, P (2022)

³⁷ Abeysekara, Siriwardana & Meng 2023

³⁸ Abeysekara, Siriwardana & Meng 2023

³⁹ UNICEF 2019, UN Women 2015, UK AID et al 2018

⁴⁰ Gov Nepal/ CR council 2023

⁴¹ Helldén, D. et al 2021; Plan et al 2021

⁴² Save the Children 2023

⁴³ Gov Nepal/ CR council 2023

⁴⁴ Plan et al 2021; FAO, RMIT University 2023

⁴⁵ Plan et al 2021

⁴⁶ Plan et al 2021

⁴⁷ Pope et al (2020); Corno et al 2023

⁴⁸ UK AID et al 2018

capacity to diversify livelihoods in the face of climate change and are highly reliant on the support of others at times of crisis.⁴⁹

Family for Every Child's member organisation in Bangladesh, Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID), has firsthand experience of supporting children and adults with disabilities during climate change-induced emergencies. They describe how government leaflets on the importance of going to cyclone shelters are inaccessible to those with sight loss. Likewise, those with hearing loss cannot hear warning signals of approaching cyclones and do not always make it to shelters in time. Families may struggle to move children with physical disabilities to safety during floods and some are left behind as a result. Some cyclone shelters are not wheelchair accessible. Persons with disabilities often rely on being in a familiar environment that they can easily navigate, and damage to homes, schools and communities can pose unique challenges for this group. Those consulted for this paper stressed the vulnerability of children with autism, who often also struggle to cope in the chaos surrounding a disaster.

Children with disabilities from Bangladesh consulted for this report confirmed these findings. They report roads being washed away during cyclones, further limiting their mobility, and the lack of knowledge of their needs amongst community volunteers trained to keep communities safe during cyclones.

In Sri Lanka, essential services for girls and boys with disabilities are typically disrupted by extreme weather events like floods and cyclones. Access to basic resources such as clean water can be limited. Moreover, those with special needs face challenges when it comes to evacuating during disasters and accessing emergency support. Schools may be destroyed or closed, preventing access to education, and healthcare facilities may be overwhelmed or inaccessible, leading to delays in crucial medical care. Those with mobility issues, sensory sensitivity, and dependency on specialised medical equipment or drugs often cannot access these resources. Overall, climate change exacerbates existing inequalities, making it even harder for children with disabilities to receive the education, health, and emergency services they need. Families caring for these children face increased stress and financial strain as they deal with the rising costs of medical treatment, rehabilitation, and specialised support services in the midst of environmental instability.

Consultations carried out with children in the four countries revealed that they are aware of the impacts of climate change and the steps that need to be taken to mitigate its effects.

The impacts of climate change on children's movement

The impacts of climate change on the drivers of children's movement

Many of the known drivers of children's movement (as outlined in the first section of this report) are or will be exacerbated by climate change.

- **Poverty.** For example, Bangladesh has one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and poverty halved between 2000 and 2016.⁵⁰ Climate change is threatening this progress.⁵¹ Surveys carried out in communities highly affected by climate change show a steep decline in agricultural and livestock production, with a majority of families struggling to maintain their

⁴⁹ UK AID et al 2018

⁵⁰ WB 2022b

⁵¹ WB 2022b

income levels.⁵² Climate change will also undo much of the significant reductions in household poverty seen in Nepal in recent years, especially in families dependent on agriculture.⁵³

- **Food security.** Climate change-induced supply shocks have led to dramatic increases in food prices across the region in recent years, making it difficult for many families to afford adequate nutrition.⁵⁴ According to the World Food Programme, in 2022, 6.3 million people in Sri Lanka were food insecure and required humanitarian assistance.⁵⁵ Children consulted for this report in Bangladesh said they often lack sufficient food to eat following emergencies. In the Sundarbans region of India, disasters have damaged food storage facilities, further compromising food availability.⁵⁶
- **Health and the death of parents or caregivers.** Environmental degradation, particularly air pollution and inadequate water and sanitation, is linked to 32 per cent of all deaths in Bangladesh.⁵⁷ Over four million Nepalese are affected by the health impacts of extreme heat,⁵⁸ and climate change increases the risk of vector and waterborne diseases and pollution.⁵⁹ Higher rates of diarrheal infections, respiratory diseases and mental health problems as a result of climate change are being reported in India⁶⁰ and Sri Lanka.⁶¹ Although data is not always disaggregated by age or family relationship, it is likely that many of those who die as a result of climate change are parents or caregivers. Elderly grandparent kinship carers may be especially vulnerable.
- **Education.** For example, in Bangladesh heatwaves have led to school closures,⁶² floods and river erosion have destroyed schools,⁶³ and cyclones have left children without text books.⁶⁴ Poverty exacerbated by climate change can lead to increased child labour and school dropout.⁶⁵ Children taken out of school temporarily in the aftermath of a disaster often never return.⁶⁶ In Nepal, experts interviewed for this report highlighted how children often miss school during droughts as they are busy travelling long distances to collect water. Likewise, in India and Sri Lanka, children's schooling is frequently disrupted by cyclones, by their school infrastructure being used as a community shelter in the aftermath of an extreme weather event, by the loss of electricity that prohibits them from studying at night, and by the hunger they experience as a result of their families' loss of livelihoods.
- **Violence in the family and wider community.** For example, 8 per cent of respondents in a survey in one community in Bangladesh reported that gender-based violence rose during and

⁵² IRC 2023; Hevetas and OKUP 2021

⁵³ WB 2022; Plan et al 2021

⁵⁴ <https://climatefactchecks.org/how-does-climate-change-effect-food-security-sri-lankan-context/>

⁵⁵ <https://climatefactchecks.org/how-does-climate-change-effect-food-security-sri-lankan-context/>

⁵⁶ <https://climatefactchecks.org/how-does-climate-change-effect-food-security-sri-lankan-context/>

⁵⁷ WB 2022b

⁵⁸ WB 2022a

⁵⁹ WB 2022a

⁶⁰ World Bank 2021

⁶¹ Gunawardhana 2023

⁶² Save the Children 2024

⁶³ World Economic Forum 2022; UNICEF 2019

⁶⁴ IRC 2023

⁶⁵ IRC 2023

⁶⁶ UNICEF 2019

after disasters.⁶⁷ Violence in the family may lead to family breakdown, another known driver of separation. Girls, and both boys and girls with disabilities, are especially vulnerable to violence after disasters in Bangladesh.⁶⁸ CSID report that children with learning and communication disabilities are more vulnerable to sexual abuse in cyclone shelters, a fact also raised by the boys and girls consulted for this report. Children who experience violence may leave their homes to escape this abuse, or may be placed into alternative care by the state as part of safeguarding measures.

- **Exacerbating existing disadvantage.** In all four countries and across the region, the impacts of climate change are particularly acute for those who live in ecologically vulnerable contexts in the poorest communities and who experience poverty and marginalization because of gender, religion, ethnicity, disability and other factors.⁶⁹ For example, climate change has a disproportionate impact on low caste groups in Nepal, which are also more vulnerable to child trafficking and child migration for work.⁷⁰

In addition to affecting these drivers of children's movement, climate change impacts adult migration, which in turn affects children's movement. The migration of adult family members for work is common in many South Asian communities. For example, almost half of all households in Nepal have a family member working in or returned from abroad, with 800,000 Nepalis moving abroad to work in 2023.⁷¹ Evidence suggests that such movement is driven in part by disasters and decline in agricultural productivity caused by climate change.⁷² Adult migration brings both costs and benefits to families and communities. It can increase household incomes through remittances.⁷³ However, it can also lead to a temporary fall in household incomes to cover the costs of migration or whilst migrants get established.⁷⁴ Male migration leads to female-headed households, which are often more vulnerable to climate shocks.⁷⁵ For example, experts interviewed for this report in Nepal state that female-headed households are often unable to utilise government funds for rebuilding homes destroyed by climate change as they lack male adults in the household to carry out building work. Evidence from Bangladesh and Nepal suggests that traffickers often target women and children from these households.⁷⁶ Male adult migration has also led to well-facilitated routes for movement. Seeing the benefits of this migration can encourage boys to migrate.⁷⁷ Traffickers can exploit these routes, including for child trafficking.⁷⁸

⁶⁷ IRC 2023

⁶⁸ IRC 2023

⁶⁹ UNICEF and IOM 2021

⁷⁰ US State Department 2023a; WB 2022a

⁷¹ Joseph 2024

⁷² Climate change network; IFRC 202; Gautam 2017; Rizal et al 2022

⁷³ UN Women 2015

⁷⁴ WB 2022a; Climate change network; Arslan et al 2021; Gautam 2017; Climate change network

⁷⁵ WB 2022

⁷⁶ IOM 2016; Bharadwaj, et al 2021; Jackson 2023; DFID 2019

⁷⁷ Climate change network 2019

⁷⁸ US state department 2023b

Evidence that climate change is leading to increases in the number of children on the move

The displacement of children by disasters

Millions of children and families have been displaced by disasters related to climate change in South Asia.⁷⁹ For example, in Bangladesh 2.3 million children were displaced by storms between 2016 and 2021 and a further 950,000 by floods.⁸⁰ In this same period in Nepal, 190,000 children (1.8 per cent of the child population) were displaced by floods.⁸¹ Likewise, floods in June 2024 drove thousands of children and families in Sri Lanka from their homes and schools⁸² and recent flooding (Sept 2024) in West Bengal has completely submerged villages in multiple areas of the state, forcing thousands to seek safety elsewhere.⁸³ Children are also commonly displaced by landslides in Nepal,⁸⁴ Sri Lanka⁸⁵ and the northern and southern regions of West Bengal, India.⁸⁶

Displacement is widely projected to increase in the coming years.⁸⁷ For example, the government of Bangladesh estimates that 20 million people could be displaced by sea level rises over the next 40 years.⁸⁸

Many families who are temporarily displaced choose to return to their home communities after a period in flood or cyclone shelters.⁸⁹ However, some never go back, choosing instead to migrate to cities.⁹⁰ This migration places greater stress on already overwhelmed and overcrowded urban centres and high density communities, which typically lack essential services such as water and sanitation.

Family separation is a reality for many displaced children. Across South Asia and in all four countries where consultations were held, there are reports of children moving on their own or with peers or unrelated adults to shelters or nearby urban centres, where they are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation and trafficking. As mentioned above, boys and girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable to such separation, either because they are left behind when their families or caregivers flee or because they become confused or distressed in the chaos surrounding disasters and run away from families and communities.

Planned relocation of communities

In Nepal, some mountainous villages have been relocated because farming is no longer viable.⁹¹ This movement may involve going to higher altitudes where rainfall is more regular.⁹² In some cases,

⁷⁹ Cited in Marof 2024; UNICEF 2019; WB 2022

⁸⁰ UNICEF 2023a

⁸¹ UNICEF 2023a

⁸² <https://www.childfund.org/campaigns/emergencies/help-children-after-sri-lanka-floods/>

⁸³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/west-bengal/west-bengal-flood-victims-complain-of-inadequate-relief-materials/article68668361.ece>

⁸⁴ Lama 2021

⁸⁵ World Bank 2021

⁸⁶ Haldar et al 2021

⁸⁷ WB 2022b; Hansen and MacDonald 2021; UNICEF 2023a

⁸⁸ Cited in UNICEF 2022b

⁸⁹ ILO 2023b

⁹⁰ ILO 2023b

⁹¹ Lama 2021; CNA video

⁹² Lama 2021

elderly family members refuse to move, splitting families up, and depriving children of a crucial source of care.⁹³

Migration of children with families

Urbanisation is rapid in Nepal, Bangladesh and India, for which climate change is a major contributing factor.⁹⁴ For example, in Bangladesh, rising sea levels, the salination of land, drought, river erosion and repeated exposure to sudden onset emergencies such as cyclones are all said to be contributing to movement to cities.⁹⁵ One survey in a community vulnerable to climate change in Bangladesh found that climate change was a contributing factor in migration in 60 per cent of cases.⁹⁶ In Nepal, damage to the ecosystem has pushed many to move from mountainous areas to the lower lying cities.⁹⁷ Migration to urban centres following an extreme weather event was commonly cited by children consulted for this paper in Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka.

Climate change is also said to have exacerbated communal conflict in Bangladesh; some Hindu families are moving from coastal areas of Bangladesh to India to escape this conflict.⁹⁸ Climate change experts and community members in Sri Lanka consulted for this report also reported increased social tensions over dwindling resources.

Evidence suggests that much migration to cities involves adult household members moving alone, though children do sometimes migrate with their families. One survey of 480 households in a community affected by climate change in Bangladesh found that around 70 per cent of households had a family member who had migrated, but only about 4 per cent of households had migrated together.⁹⁹ These families preferred to stay in their community and tried multiple strategies before resorting to the entire household moving.¹⁰⁰ Family migration was also more risky and costly than just one household member leaving, and caregivers did not like to see children's schooling disrupted.¹⁰¹ However, this research also noted shifting patterns of migration as the impacts of climate change worsened.¹⁰² Migration from this community is now occurring for growing lengths of time and over longer distances.¹⁰³ It is therefore likely that the migration of entire families will increase in the years to come.

In India and Sri Lanka, children and adults consulted for this report expressed concerns about the impact migration is having on the quality of family relationships and stability. They reported an increase in marital problems when men moved to work elsewhere and women remained behind, shouldered with the responsibility of running the household and caring for children and often elderly relatives. Infidelity between spouses was reported by adolescents in India, who said that migration of their fathers had led to marital tensions, often ending in divorce or separation.

⁹³ CNA video

⁹⁴ WB 2022a; IFRC 202; Gov of Nepal 202; WB 2022b; UNICEF 2024b; Rana and Alina 2021

⁹⁵ WB 2022b; UNICEF 2024b; ILO 2023b; Rizal 2022; Hansen and MacDonald 202

⁹⁶ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

⁹⁷ WB 2022a; IFRC 2021; UNICEF 2017; Rizal 2022

⁹⁸ Hansen and MacDonald 2021

⁹⁹ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁰⁰ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁰¹ Hevetas and OKUP 2021- see also Jackson 2023

¹⁰² Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁰³ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

Evidence from Bangladesh suggests that the poorest families cannot afford to migrate and remain behind in hazard-affected areas whilst richer households move away.¹⁰⁴ Also vulnerable are ‘tiger widows’ – women in the Sunderbans whose husbands have died as a result of dangerous human-wildlife interactions.¹⁰⁵ In all four countries there are indications that trapped populations are not only at risk of experiencing future extreme weather events (which may compel their migration) but also typically lack access to basic services such as health care and education, either as a result of the destruction of infrastructure or the departure of large portions of the community, including the professionals who once provided these amenities.

The migration of families sometimes involves an element of exploitation and trafficking. In their annual report on trafficking, the US State Department notes that indebted families in Bangladesh are coerced to move to work in the shrimp, garment, tea, ship breaking and brick kiln industries, with children working alongside parents.¹⁰⁶ As with other forms of trafficking,¹⁰⁷ it is likely that this exploitative form of movement will increase across the region as families struggle to survive.

Child migration without families, child labour and child trafficking

Climate change plays a role in children leaving their rural homes to a life on the streets of South Asia’s cities. Family for Every Child member Voice of Children estimates that 30-40 per cent of the street-connected children they work with in Nepal have left villages because of droughts, landslides, and low agricultural productivity, with many of these children living alone on the streets.¹⁰⁸ In some cases, the stress of such challenges increases violence in the home, prompting children to leave.¹⁰⁹

“Due to the lack of rain, we couldn’t grow the food items we needed and I came to Kathmandu with my family. But I faced many problems including violence and I couldn’t go to school and I ended up on the street.” (Street connected child, Kathmandu)¹¹⁰

Recent research on children living on the streets in Bangladesh found that children migrate alone to cities for a range of reasons. Drivers include macro factors such as climate change-related disasters and consequent household poverty and debt burdens, and problems within the family such as violence and abuse.¹¹¹ As noted above, climate change may also be contributing to domestic violence.

Evidence shows that climate change is often a driver of child migration for work in South Asia. For example, research carried out in a rural Bangladesh in 2014 found that 17 per cent of the 617 surveyed households had sent children away to work as part of adaptation to climate change.¹¹² Interestingly, this figure was only slightly lower than the rates of adult migration deployed by these families.¹¹³ Families in Nepal use children’s labour in brick kilns and as domestic workers as way to diversify incomes in the face of climate change.¹¹⁴ Experts interviewed for this report in Nepal and India report children being sent from climate change-affected communities to live with distant relatives in the hope of gaining access to school. These children are often exploited as domestic

¹⁰⁴ Hevetas and OKUP 2021; WB 2022b

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Praajak, June 2024

¹⁰⁶ US State Department 2023b

¹⁰⁷ US State Department 2023b; IOM 2016

¹⁰⁸ Interview with VOC; VOC 2023

¹⁰⁹ Interview with VOC; VOC 2023

¹¹⁰ VOC 2023

¹¹¹ UNICEF 2024b

¹¹² Alston et al 2014

¹¹³ Alston et al 2014

¹¹⁴ Kagawa 2022; Plan et al 2021; ILO 2023a; Lama 2021

workers. In Sri Lanka and India, it is common for adolescent boys in climate change-affected communities to migrate for work in order to replace or supplement lost family income. Most travel with older male family members or close neighbours, often under pre-arranged 'contracts' with agents who work for hotels, cloth mills or jewellery shops in larger urban centres.

In their annual trafficking in persons report, the US State Department cite climate change as a factor contributing to child and adult trafficking in Nepal and Bangladesh.¹¹⁵ A 2019 UK Government (Department for International Development) Report on modern slavery in Nepal noted similar links between climate change, disasters and rising rates of trafficking.¹¹⁶ The IOM has found that both adult and child trafficking increased following cyclones in Bangladesh in 2007 and 2009.¹¹⁷ Moreover, organisations working in the Bangladeshi Sundarbans have noted a rise in child trafficking as result of the impacts of climate change.¹¹⁸ Both boys and girls are trafficked, with girls most commonly into domestic work and commercial sexual exploitation, and boys into agriculture and construction.¹¹⁹

In Nepal, experts interviewed for this report have found that child trafficking often follows a period in shelters after a climate emergency, with traffickers targeting displaced children and their families at their most vulnerable time. This vulnerability experienced by children and families in shelters is common across the region and globally.¹²⁰

Family for Every Child member Association for Community Development (ACD) has also noted a rise in child trafficking in Bangladesh following a move to a large city as a result of climate change, including to the Middle East to work in factories. ACD is often contacted by local police to support child trafficking survivors, and commonly hear how climate change has played a role in their movement.

“When you ask them what are the reasons [for movement], they will say there is no water, no sanitation, we have to use the fields toilets because of flood damage, our house was damaged by flooding.” (ACD, Bangladesh)

CSID has found that children with disabilities in Bangladesh are vulnerable to lone migration and trafficking in the context of climate change, a fact also asserted by children with disabilities consulted for this report. These children often end up begging on the streets. Those with physical disabilities can gain more money from begging than other children and are consequently targeted by traffickers, especially in the aftermath of emergencies. Child trafficking was not reported during consultations carried out by Family for Every Child members in Sri Lanka (FISD) and India (Praajak), though deeper analysis may reveal similar linkages between climate change and child trafficking in these two contexts.

Voice of Children in Nepal has found that climate change also makes reintegrating street connected children with their families more challenging as families no longer have the reliable sources of income needed to care for children well.¹²¹

Movement for marriage

¹¹⁵ US State Department 2023b

¹¹⁶ DFID 2019

¹¹⁷ IOM 2016

¹¹⁸ Jackson 2023; Bharadwaj et al 2021

¹¹⁹ US State Department 2023b

¹²⁰ Datzberger et al 2023

¹²¹ Interview VOC

Climate change and child marriage are interconnected in complex ways, particularly in marginalised communities or those that are most vulnerable to weather-related impacts on their livelihoods, assets and wellbeing. There is increasing evidence that climate change crises are exacerbating the known drivers of child marriage globally, including in South Asia.¹²² The practice tends to increase as families try to cope with economic precarity and basic survival.¹²³ Marriage of young daughters can be seen by some families as a way to ensure food and financial security for girls and to provide for their physical safety.¹²⁴ Experts and Family for Every Child members in India, Bangladesh and Nepal consulted for this report also made these assertions.

The depletion of essential resources that accompanies droughts, floods, storms and other extreme weather events also indirectly drives child marriage by disrupting education and displacing children and families.¹²⁵ Girls who are out of school are at greater risk of child marriage, as they may have no or limited opportunities to pursue alternative socially-acceptable life paths and may be impacted by social norms and economic pressures.¹²⁶ Being uprooted also makes girls more vulnerable to child marriage as a coping mechanism or a means of protecting them from risks associated with displacement, such as sexual violence, trafficking or exploitation.¹²⁷ Child marriage, in turn, increases risks of physical and mental health challenges, particularly amongst adolescent girls and reduces their capacities to cope with other forms of adversity posed by climate change.

Climate change can also exacerbate existing gender inequalities, as women and girls often bear the brunt of its impacts due to social and cultural norms.¹²⁸ A report published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows 41.6 per cent of women marrying before 18, and that this figure is rising.¹²⁹

One recent survey in communities affected by climate change in Bangladesh suggests that child marriage increased by 38 per cent after disasters.¹³⁰ Older, but more in-depth research from 2014 explores how climate affects child marriage in one area of Bangladesh.¹³¹ This study found that girls are marrying at younger ages due to climate change because younger girls require smaller dowries and families are too impoverished to pay higher amounts. ACD works extensively with girls who have married and has noted similar trends. Climate change-related disasters also increase girls' vulnerability to sexual abuse, and some families are marrying girls at younger ages in an effort to protect them, and their 'honour', from this harm.¹³² Moreover, adolescents and experts consulted in India for this report also described how the marriage of girls is understood by parents as a way to reduce the responsibilities of raising girls. When fathers migrate for work, mothers sometimes feel overwhelmed by the challenges of running the household and do not feel able to ensure the safety and protection of their daughters. In such cases, they may seek a husband for their post-pubescent daughter.

Elopement was also reported as an increasing phenomenon in the communities where Praajak works. Because women are often working to earn money to help sustain the family, in addition to caring for those in their households, their children may spend stretches of time unattended. From about the age

¹²² Corno et al 2020; Corno and Voena 2016; Helldén et al 2021

¹²³ Helldén et al 2021

¹²⁴ Helldén et al 2021

¹²⁵ Helldén et al 2021

¹²⁶ Corno et al 2020

¹²⁷ Helldén et al 2021

¹²⁸ Pastén, Figueroa & Fuentes 2024; Benevolenza & DeRigne 2019

¹²⁹ Cited in Marof 2024

¹³⁰ IRC 2023

¹³¹ Alston et al 2014

¹³² Alston et al 2014

of 16 onwards, adolescents in the Sundarbans were said to seize on this opportunity to elope with the partners of their choice.

Importantly, recent studies in Bangladesh and elsewhere are beginning to illuminate important distinctions in child marriage patterns in dowry-practicing communities affected by climate change, where families have been found less likely to marry their daughters in times of drought than in instances of flooding.¹³³ Emerging evidence such as this underscores the importance of understanding how economic shocks from climate change-induced events may have differential effects in different settings.

Impacts of climate change on the experiences and vulnerabilities of children on the move

Living in South Asia's cities

Life for climate migrants in South Asia's cities is hard. Most migrant families live in slum communities, with four million people living in 5000 slums in Dhaka alone.¹³⁴ Although poverty has fallen in some countries in the region in recent years, it has risen in many urban areas.¹³⁵ Overcrowding, poor water, sanitation and housing, and high levels of pollution make for difficult living conditions.¹³⁶

Many of these problems are exacerbated by climate change. Informal settlements are particularly likely to be damaged by storms or flooding, and coastal cities by sea level rises.¹³⁷ Service provision has not been able to keep up with the speed of urban growth caused in part by climate change.¹³⁸ Migrant families cannot always access schools or health care that does exist in cities.¹³⁹ For example, children consulted for this report in Nepal spoke of climate migrants lacking the right documents to access schooling. Service provision as part of disaster relief is often limited to the areas surrounding the flood, cyclone or storm, and families who move to cities following such emergencies often miss out on this provision.¹⁴⁰ Conversely, for many children, moving from remote areas to cities improves their access to education and other services, especially once families are settled and somewhat established.¹⁴¹

Many families are reluctant to migrate and do so only when all other options have been exhausted.¹⁴² Some are pushed into migration with limited or no opportunities for planning as their homes have been destroyed by storms, floods or river and coastal erosion. As a result, families typically arrive in cities with their resources depleted and limited plans for their survival.¹⁴³ A loss of social networks can make it hard for adults to find decently paid work.¹⁴⁴ Wages are also diminished by the sheer number of migrants, which leads to high levels of competition for work.¹⁴⁵ This means that usually both men

¹³³ Pope et al 2023

¹³⁴ WB 2022a

¹³⁵ Hansen and MacDonald 2021

¹³⁶ Hansen and MacDonald 2021; WB 2022a; IFRC 2021

¹³⁷ WB 2022b; Government of Nepal 2021

¹³⁸ WB 2022b; ILO 2023b

¹³⁹ Rana and Alina 2021

¹⁴⁰ UNICEF 2022b

¹⁴¹ Hossain, B et al 2022

¹⁴² Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁴³ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁴⁴ Hossain, B et al 2022

¹⁴⁵ Rashid 2020

and women have to seek work, leaving children at home to fend for themselves.¹⁴⁶ Exploitative and dangerous child labour are also commonly part of survival strategies, especially for recently migrated families.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, evidence suggests that families often move to cities because there are more job opportunities there for their children.¹⁴⁸ Many children work on the streets where they face stigma and abuse, and exposure to criminal activities.¹⁴⁹

The movement of families to cities can lead to further, more risky, movement for children. For example, in Bangladesh there are reports of girls marrying as a means of protecting them from the high levels of sexual harassment in slums.¹⁵⁰ ACD has noted that unsupervised children in Dhaka's slums are particularly vulnerable to being recruited by traffickers.

These challenges have led some to suggest that migration does not improve life for those affected by climate change in South Asia.¹⁵¹ It is argued that rather than viewing migration as an effective strategy to adapt to climate change, it can be better described as maladaptive.¹⁵²

Living in refugee camps

Bangladesh hosts more than 895,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, including many children.¹⁵³ Most are living in densely populated refugee camps along the coastal belt where living conditions have been worsened by climate change and environments are prone to flooding, landslides and cyclones.¹⁵⁴ In 2021, flooding and landslides made 24,000 refugees homeless.¹⁵⁵ Local cyclone shelters are not large enough to accommodate refugees as well as the local population.¹⁵⁶ As a result, some refugees are being relocated to an island off the coast of Bangladesh which is even more vulnerable to flooding and cyclones.¹⁵⁷ This vicious cycle of exacerbated and worsening vulnerability is common across the region and the four countries where consultations took place.

Access to education, health care and other services

Movement because of climate change can often mean the end of education for children.¹⁵⁸ Boys and girls may be required to work rather than attend school, or may move frequently, making it hard for them to register in schools.¹⁵⁹ As noted above, movement to cities can also improve access to education and other services for some. As well as providing an education, school can also be important for the mental health of children on the move because it provides them with structure and access to peers and broader social supports and can help them to integrate into their new communities.¹⁶⁰

¹⁴⁶ UNICEF 2019

¹⁴⁷ UNICEF 2019; Rosario, S and Chowdhury, M (2023); US State Department 2023b; World Economic Forum 2022; Hoque 2023

¹⁴⁸ Hoque 2023

¹⁴⁹ UNICEF 2024b

¹⁵⁰ Hevetas and OKUP 2021

¹⁵¹ Rana and Alina 2021; Rosario and Chowdhury 2023

¹⁵² Rana and Alina 2021

¹⁵³ UNICEF and IOM 2022

¹⁵⁴ UNICEF and IOM 2022; UNICEF 2024a

¹⁵⁵ UNICEF and IOM 2022

¹⁵⁶ UNICEF 2019

¹⁵⁷ Hansen and MacDonald 2021

¹⁵⁸ Kagawa 2022

¹⁵⁹ Kagawa 2022; UNICEF 2019

¹⁶⁰ UNICEF and IOM 2022

Children displaced by climate change may miss out on health care. One study found that 21 per cent of children displaced by climate change in an area of rural Bangladesh lived within 5 kilometres of a health care provider compared with 89 per cent of households that had not been displaced.¹⁶¹ In addition to the financial and other barriers to access, those with disabilities may face challenges accessing rehabilitation, health care and inclusive schooling when they initially move to a new place.

As noted above, climate change places a strain on economies, and this may also diminish tax revenue and the ability of governments to deliver other services, including social protection.

Mental health impacts

Exposure to disasters, particularly repeated exposures, and the uncertainties associated with life in general and movement in particular are likely to have major ramifications for boys' and girls' mental health. One observational study, undertaken before and after a major flood in Bangladesh noted an increase in aggressive behaviour and involuntary urination among children, which the authors suggested arose from mental health issues.¹⁶² Children consulted for this paper in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India also highlighted emotional wellbeing issues associated with climate change-related movement. In Nepal, parents and caregivers reported that children struggled to cope with frequent moves and were upset by what they had witnessed during climate change-related emergencies. In Bangladesh, children reported that it is particularly hard for their peers with disabilities to adjust to change, leading to behavioural and emotional challenges. In India, experts noted that movement to the streets can lead to or exacerbate mental health problems for children. Additionally, women in the Sunderbans consulted for this report drew attention to the mental health challenges faced by children who are left behind when their parents migrate after a cyclone or as a result of the slow onset effects of climate change, such as ever-decreasing crop yields. Grandparents provided the majority of the care for these boys and girls but it was felt this care was frequently compromised and that children's mental health can be negatively affected in these circumstances.

Vulnerabilities of working and trafficked children

Climate change increases the risks faced by children who have migrated for work or been trafficked as a result of climate change or for other reasons. For example, children working in Nepal's cities are often in unsafe workplaces which are more prone to damage or destruction during climate change-related emergencies.¹⁶³ Some examples across the region include children suffering from extreme cold after being sent to remote mountainous areas to collect valuable fungus,¹⁶⁴ and being made to work outside in lower lying areas exposed to heatwaves.¹⁶⁵

Research on adult migration in Nepal suggests that when movement is a crisis response rather than planned, it places migrants at greater risk.¹⁶⁶ The same is likely to be the case for child migrants, not only in Nepal but across the region.

Risks of staying put

Although migration leads to multiple risks for children on the move, remaining in communities can also be hazardous. In Bangladesh, some families refuse to move to cyclone or flood shelters due to

¹⁶¹ Cited in UNICEF 2022b

¹⁶² UNICEF 2022b

¹⁶³ Brown and Dodman 2014

¹⁶⁴ Plan et al 2021

¹⁶⁵ Government of Nepal 2021

¹⁶⁶ Arslan et al 2021

lack of space, fears for safety, especially for women and girls, and poor water and sanitation.¹⁶⁷ This is a risky calculus because remaining in flood-prone communities has been shown to increase food insecurity and the risk of drowning, with many risks especially high for children with disabilities.¹⁶⁸ Staff of Praajak in India noted that boys and girls are frequently left behind when their families move. Families across the region face intractable challenges.

Responding to children on the move in the context of climate change

Guiding principles

Global evidence and the discussions carried out for this report suggest the importance of the following principles, to be applied across all responses to climate change-related child movement:¹⁶⁹

- **Take a rights-based approach** which seeks to maintain children's rights and has the best interests of the child as the primary consideration.
- **Ensure a strong focus on accountability** so that government and other actors are held accountable for decisions which contribute to children's movement in the context of climate change.
- **Promote child participation in all decisions that affect them**, and in programming and advocacy around climate change.
- **Consider both the benefits and the risks of children's movement.** Balance efforts to prevent children and their families being forced to migrate with measures to improve the lives of those who have moved a result of climate change.
- **Recognise children's right not to be separated from their families unless it is in their best interests.** Prevent family separation and facilitate the reintegration of separated children back to families.
- **Work to protect children on the move** from harm, and ensure that they always have access to services, including mental and physical health services and education.
- **Acknowledge that the impacts of climate change on children's movement are likely to vary** within and between countries. Develop context-specific solutions.
- **Recognise that climate change can have hugely varying impacts on the movement and vulnerability of different groups of children.** Apply principles of non-discrimination in all responses.

Using evidence on children's movement to advocate for greater national government action on climate change

¹⁶⁷ IRC 2023

¹⁶⁸ IRC 2023

¹⁶⁹ Taken from: FAO, RMIT University 2023; UNICEF 2022a and the evidence provided in the first section of this report

Family for Every Child members argue that evidence of the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, such as children on the move, should be used to create a stronger impetus for government action on climate change.¹⁷⁰ This assertion is important because government policies and strategies on climate change in the region are of mixed effectiveness.

Bangladesh is recognised as a world leader in climate change adaptation, as one of the first countries to develop a national adaptation plan.¹⁷¹ It has a strong track record of building disaster preparedness and response mechanisms, with the introduction of early warning systems and cyclone shelters, which have helped to reduce death rates in cyclones from above 300,000 to less than 35 over the last 50 years.¹⁷² However, Bangladesh needs to increase its investment in climate change response by seven times if it is to meet stated policy commitments.¹⁷³

Although there are several policies and strategies on climate change in Nepal,¹⁷⁴ implementation of these strategies is weak.¹⁷⁵ For example, the World Bank highlights a lack of integration of climate change into sectoral and subnational planning, limited coordination mechanisms, and an absence of processes for engaging NGOs and the private sector.¹⁷⁶

Sri Lanka is recognised for its comprehensive policy framework and its focus on adaptation, as articulated in the *National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change Impacts*.¹⁷⁷ In 2022 it launched the *Climate Prosperity Plan*, which aims to galvanize efforts to address central climate risks and promote risk-informed investment, such as compulsory crop insurance and natural disaster insurance schemes and a range of social protection mechanisms.¹⁷⁸ However, implementation is challenged by a range of constraints related to governance, institutions and funding.

India has made some strides in its efforts to combat climate change. It has set ambitious climate goals and made notable progress on some fronts, particularly in reducing its carbon emissions and increasing its renewable energy capacity.¹⁷⁹ However, on the whole its climate targets have been deemed “Highly Insufficient”, in part because of its continued reliance on coal power and intention to increase its coal production in the next decade.¹⁸⁰

Using evidence on children’s movement to advocate for reduced emissions, and loss and damage payments/ repatriations

Demonstrating that climate change is increasing children’s vulnerability and leading to the extreme forms of exploitation experienced by many children on the move could be used to encourage improved responses to climate change by Western nations, such as reducing global emissions. Specifically, given the extremely low emissions of some South Asian nations,¹⁸¹ such evidence could help shift perceptions of such payments from aid to reparations for harm inflicted by high polluting, higher income countries.

¹⁷⁰ Voice of Children 2023

¹⁷¹ Huq et al 2024;

¹⁷² Huq et al 2024; World Bank 2022b

¹⁷³ Huq et al 2024;

¹⁷⁴ Government of Nepal 2019; Government of Nepal 2021

¹⁷⁵ Rizal 2021??; World Bank 2022

¹⁷⁶ World Bank 2022a

¹⁷⁷ Climate Change Secretariat 2016

¹⁷⁸ Government of Sri Lanka 2022.

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/publications/assessing-india-s-ambitious-climate-commitments/>

¹⁸⁰ <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/india/2023-07-06/>

¹⁸¹ Plan et al 2021

Including reference to children, and specifically to children on the move, in climate change policies

Policies on climate change in the region are mixed in terms of the extent to which they acknowledge climate change-related movement and specifically children on the move.

Bangladesh's policies on climate change adaptation reference enabling the migration of those escaping climate hazards, and supporting displaced persons and migrants living in cities.¹⁸² Plans include developing cities that are resilient to climate change, with more robust drainage, water management and housing.¹⁸³ Some efforts have been made by the government to support those displaced by climate change.¹⁸⁴ Bangladesh has also raised the issue of climate change migration at the global level, by tabling a paper and organising a side event on this topic at COP 29 (the 'Conference of Parties' a major international meeting on climate change).¹⁸⁵ However, the ILO argues that further work needs to be done to ensure the safety of migrants in Bangladesh, particularly women and children, and access to decent work for adult migrants.¹⁸⁶

Key climate change policies in Nepal, Sri Lanka and India include limited reference to children's specific needs, and to children on the move.¹⁸⁷

Ensuring ongoing service provision

It is vital that essential services such as health, education and child protection continue during climate change emergencies and are made available to all children on the move.¹⁸⁸ Given growing rates of family separation because of climate change, it is also important to ensure appropriate alternative care provision. In line with global guidance, this means that maximum efforts must be made to prevent family separation and reunite children with parents.¹⁸⁹ Where children cannot be cared for by parents, kinship care should always be the first option explored. Temporary foster care or high quality small group homes can also be valid care options. Institutional care should be used as a last resort only. Emergencies should not be used as an excuse to expand residential care or slow down family reintegration.

Improving social protection for vulnerable families and children on the move

Building the economic resilience of vulnerable families would reduce the need for children to move and the challenges faced by children and families who have already moved.¹⁹⁰ As well as cash payments, livelihoods diversification and guidance on agricultural adaptations would also help to improve economic resilience. The need for material support to help families cope with climate change was repeatedly emphasised by the children consulted for this report.

Currently, social protection strategies in the region are uneven across countries in terms of their responsiveness to climate shocks, leaving many families affected by climate change unprotected.¹⁹¹

¹⁸² ILO 2023b

¹⁸³ Rosario and Chowdhury 2023

¹⁸⁴ Rosario and Chowdhury 2023

¹⁸⁵ IOM 2022

¹⁸⁶ ILO 2023b

¹⁸⁷ Government of Nepal 2019; Government of Nepal 2021; Government of Sri Lanka 2022; <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/india/2023-07-06/>;

¹⁸⁸ UNICEF and IOM 2022

¹⁸⁹ UN (2010) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children

¹⁹⁰ ADB 2021

¹⁹¹ WB 2022a, WB 2022b; UNICEF 2019

For example, only 25 per cent of those affected by the 2017 floods in Nepal were covered by social protection programmes.¹⁹² In Bangladesh, ACD notes that the targeting of social protection does not always reach the households most vulnerable to climate change. Payouts from government in response to emergencies also focuses on those affected by sudden rather than slow onset emergencies. This means that those in drought affected areas are especially disadvantaged. In Sri Lanka, progress has been limited in comparison with India, which has developed multidimensional programmes that combine cash transfers, public works, training and other supports to boost the resilience of households to climate shocks.¹⁹³

Families including persons with disabilities may be especially in need of social protection in the face of climate change, given their enhanced vulnerability. In Bangladesh, evidence suggests that these families are often not able to access this assistance.¹⁹⁴

Making cities safer for children on the move affected by climate change

Governments in the region recognises that growing migration from rural to urban areas, caused in part by climate change, means that urban living conditions must be improved, particularly in unplanned settlements.¹⁹⁵ This includes making such habitats safer during climate emergencies such as floods.¹⁹⁶

Many commentators in the region argue that more needs to be done in this regard, with better urban planning, safer and more affordable housing, food systems that are resilient to climate change, efforts to build migrant skills and work opportunities, and decarbonisation of city economies.¹⁹⁷ Some argue that efforts are needed to encourage migrants to move away from mega cities such as Dhaka towards smaller urban centres.¹⁹⁸

Although all of these interventions would benefit children who move to cities, further work is needed to consider their specific priorities. For example, a roundtable discussion on this topic in Bangladesh suggested a particular focus on improving child care so that parents don't have to take their children to work with them or leave them home alone.¹⁹⁹

Improving disaster risk reduction and response

Reducing the number of children forced to move because of climate change and improving the security of those that have already moved requires improvements to disaster risk reduction and response.²⁰⁰ As discussed further below, community and child engagement is seen as vital for successful disaster preparedness (see also Box 1).²⁰¹ Considering the specific needs of children with disabilities and other vulnerable groups is also vital (see Box 2). The children consulted for this report in Nepal were keen to highlight the need to address corruption in disaster response.

¹⁹² Climate change network 2021

¹⁹³ Costella et al 2021

¹⁹⁴ UK Aid et al 2018

¹⁹⁵ Government of Nepal 2021; Government of Nepal 2019; ILO 2023b

¹⁹⁶ Government of Nepal 2021; Government of Nepal 2019

¹⁹⁷ WB 2022b; ILO 2023b

¹⁹⁸ UNICEF 2022b

¹⁹⁹ <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/roundtable/child-migration-in-the-context-of-bangladesh-challenges-and-the-way-forward>

²⁰⁰ UNICEF and IOM 2022; ADB 2012; Climate Change Network 2021

²⁰¹ Plan et al 2021

Box1 : The role of Voice of Children in facilitating child and community engagement in disaster risk reduction

Voice of Children have worked on this issue since 2018, advocating with local governments to form disaster risk reduction committees and ensuring that these committees have climate change response plans.²⁰² Voice of Children also integrate discussions on disaster risk reduction into the self-help groups they have established in the Terai as part of efforts to prevent family separation, and in their work to reintegrate street connected across the country. In relation to reintegration, discussions around climate change and disaster risk reduction are incorporated into the awareness raising that takes place in communities prior to and immediately after children's return. Street connected children spend short periods of time living in Voice of Children's shelters before returning home. During this time, they are educated on climate change and the role that they can play in minimising its impact on their families and communities.

Box 2: Disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction

In Bangladesh the Centre for Disability and Development have worked with NGOs and persons with disabilities to develop community-based disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction action plans. This has led to making local flood shelters and evacuation boats accessible.²⁰³

Coordination bodies and cooperation

Coordination and cooperation is essential in the face of the enormous challenges posed to children in the region by climate change.²⁰⁴ Experts interviewed for this report in Nepal, India and Sri Lanka were keen to highlight the importance of coordination between government, NGOs and donors, and between the different tiers of government.

Given their unique insights from grassroots work with the most vulnerable children and communities, it is vital that national NGOs are engaged in these coordination bodies, some of which already exist at the national level. Family for Every Child members could engage with the groups.²⁰⁵

Engaging communities and children

The importance of engaging communities in responses to climate change is widely recognised in the region.²⁰⁶ As argued by the World Bank:²⁰⁷

“The most vulnerable people often live in the most extreme environments and must constantly manage and adapt to resource scarcity and shocks. Engaging with communities can help the government fine-tune its adaptation plans and design a mechanism for tracking the effectiveness of adaptation interventions over time. It will also facilitate community ownership and ensure that the most marginalised are not left behind.”²⁰⁸

²⁰² Interview with Voice of Children

²⁰³ <https://www.internal-displacement.org/good-practice/?id=1>

²⁰⁴ ILO 2023b

²⁰⁵ For example, for such a body in Nepal see Plan et al 2021

²⁰⁶ Government of Nepal 2019; World Bank 2022a/b; Plan et al 2021; Huq et al 2024

²⁰⁷ See also World Bank 2022b

²⁰⁸ World Bank 2022a

It is vital to consult communities in research, and involve them in awareness raising and disaster preparedness and response.²⁰⁹

Consultations carried out for this report in all four countries highlighted how children and wider communities have a deep understanding of climate change, and are usually the first to respond when disaster strikes. Using existing community groups and networks was described as a cost-effective means of preparing for and responding to climate change-related emergencies. Children with disabilities in Bangladesh argued that although they often rely on their families and communities to meet their needs, they also contribute through sharing their insights on climate change.

Children and young people are often excluded from responses to climate change in the region.²¹⁰ Children on the move are especially likely to be denied a voice and role, given their already disadvantaged social position.²¹¹ However, the unique perspectives and experiences of boys and girls in this group are needed,²¹² alongside a more consistent engagement of children in climate change response. Some examples of promising practice are provided in Box 1 above and Box 3 below.²¹³

Box 3: YouthNet for Climate Justice²¹⁴

YouthNet for Climate Justice was established by young people in Bangladesh in 2016. It has since documented the vulnerabilities of children and young people to climate change on in a Char (river island) community. Meetings have been held to mobilise communities and develop action plans for disaster preparedness and response.

Improving and learning from strategies respond to adult migration

Strategies designed to respond to adult migration may be relevant for children on the move for at least two reasons. First, as noted above, changes to adult movement may affect levels of child movement. Second, if the reasons behind movement are similar, the same approaches may be deployed for both groups. In general, strategies to date have focused on improving livelihood options in rural areas so that migration is a choice rather than a necessity, including, for example, shifting to climate change-resistant crops, solar irrigation, and building ponds to store water.²¹⁵ In addition it is argued that safe pathways for adult migration should be developed.²¹⁶

Need for further research and monitoring

Evidence on the impacts of climate change on children on the move is limited. Discussions with key stakeholders, and the small amount of research that does exist show that impacts are significant and also complex. Furthermore, evidence is insufficient in many cases to convince governments of the need for action in this area. Further research is clearly needed. One effective strategy may be to advocate for children's movement to be considered in existing research on migration and climate change.²¹⁷

²⁰⁹ Government of Nepal 2019; Interview with ACD Bangladesh

²¹⁰ Plan et al 2021; Brown and Dodman 2014

²¹¹ UNICEF and IOM 2022, Brown and Dodman 2014

²¹² Brown, D. and Dodman, D. (2014)

²¹³ <https://www.tdh.org/en/stories/nepal-children-fight-climate-change>

<https://wwfnepal.exposure.co/creating-a-shift-in-partnership-wwf-and-sci-in-nepal>

²¹⁴ UNICEF 2019

²¹⁵ Arslan et al 2021; Climate change Network 2021; Government of Nepal 2021

²¹⁶ Bharadwaj 2021

²¹⁷ <https://news.exeter.ac.uk/faculty-of-environment-science-and-economy/new-partnerships-to-assess-migration-as-effective-response-to-climate-change-in-south-asia/>

Family for Every Child members in India and Sri Lanka, and the experts they consulted for this report, were unanimous in their view that further research is needed on the impacts of climate change on child protection, and child migration specifically, in their settings. All pointed to a lack of data, particularly age and gender disaggregated data, on the experiences of children and their families in these contexts, and on the interventions that are needed to address their needs.

In developing the research agenda, it is vital to consider the impacts of climate change on multiple forms of movement. For example, although there is some evidence on the impacts of climate change on displacement, the migration or trafficking of families and children, and child marriage, there is limited evidence on movement into kinship care. It is also important to consider the impacts of climate change on the lives of children who have moved for reasons other than climate change (for example refugees who have fled conflict or persecution).

In developing the research agenda, it is important to consider the issues raised in the first section of this report regarding the extent to which children's movement should be viewed as an effective strategy for climate change adaptation. Doing so requires research on the following:

- The nature and extent of movement.
- The specific set of circumstances that lead to children's movement, and the degree of choice or agency that children have in decisions to move. This should explore how climate change interacts with other drivers of movement, and the effects of adult migration on children's movement.
- Can and should children's movement be prevented? Why/why not/how?
-
- What are the risks associated with children's movement? How do these according to age, gender, ability and other factors? Considering these risks, what would make migration safe?

The benefits and disadvantages of different forms of children's movement for the child, their family and community, and the communities they move to. This should include a consideration of the experiences and quality of life for children on the move or who have recently settled in new communities.

- The impact of movement on family functioning and children's wellbeing, especially when one parent has migrated for work and the other is left to care for children without support.
- The ways in which children's lone movement impacts on their relationships with family and friends and its effects on their mental health and resilience. This should include an investigation of how these relationships are/are not maintained, the joys and challenges they bring, and the types of support that children and families provide for each other. Evidence from studies on kinship care highlights the importance of relationships with parents/family, even at significant distance, is important for children's wellbeing and resilience.

<https://www.iom.int/project/knowledge-all-k4a-climate-migration-bangladesh#:~:text=Salinity%20intrusion%2C%20cyclones%2C%20and%20storm,belt%2C%20which%20covers%2019%20districts.>

To explore these two areas, it is essential to consider children's perspectives on and experiences of movement, and how these vary by factors such as the country or part of the country they live in, reasons for movement, and their age, gender, disability, religion and other characteristics.

Conclusion

Summary of findings

Climate change is having a major impact on the lives and livelihoods of vulnerable communities across South Asia. It has led to sea level rises, melting of glaciers, extreme weather events, droughts, and conflict and is damaging economies. It is likely to reverse many of the gains made in poverty reduction in the region in the years to come. Children are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, with girls, refugees, children with disabilities and those living in remote or more disaster-prone areas particularly at risk.

There is strong evidence to suggest that climate change is increasing many of the known drivers of children's movement in South Asia, including poverty and inequality, parental or caregiver death or ill health, loss of access to education, violence in the family and wider community, and adult migration.

There is also evidence to indicate that climate change is leading to increases in multiple forms of children's movement. Children in the region are frequently displaced by climate change-related disasters, and in some instances entire communities are being relocated because of these hazards.. Children often migrate with families as a result of climate change, typically to urban areas. Children also move alone, to live on the streets, to work, or because they have been trafficked. There also has been an increase in girls' movement for child marriage in some settings.

Movement may lead to benefits for children, allowing them and their families to escape from climate change-related hazards and unviable livelihoods. It can give children access to services in cities that they may not have had in their rural homes. However, movement also carries multiple risks. Life for the urban poor and those living in refugee camps in South Asia has become significantly harder as a result of climate change. Children on the move are highly vulnerable to exploitation and frequent movement can cause emotional distress and disrupt social networks and relationships. Children with disabilities on the move are especially at risk of a range of threats to their survival, protection and wellbeing.

Movement is often the result of desperate survival measures rather than a free choice. Limited efforts have been made to understand children's desires in relation to movement in South Asia. It is challenging to ascertain to what extent children would prefer to have their movement made safer, or to have their homes and communities protected so that they could remain. In either case, it is clearly in children's best interests to reduce the pace of climate change. Evidence on children's movement in this context provides further impetus for the need to reduce global emissions.

Options for next steps for Family for Every Child members in South Asia

Family for Every Child members from South Asia have suggested a range of possible strategies for working together on climate change and children on the move. These approaches have been categorised below into three broad categories: documentation and learning exchange; research; and advocacy.

Documentation and learning exchange

- Documenting and sharing experience on awareness raising within families on the risks of movement for children; effective strategies for preventing (unsafe) movement; how to make movement safer for children, especially those who are separated from their families.

- Documenting and sharing learning on how to support children on the move in the face of climate change, including with their mental health.
- Raising awareness of the impacts of climate change on children's movement amongst other member organisations, and creating stronger regional alliances of organisations working on this issue.
- Exchanging experience and approaches to awareness raising on climate change at the community level.
- Strategies to understand and support children involved in cross-border movement.

Research

- Further research and sharing of existing evidence on common drivers and impacts of children's movement in the context of climate change. This could include a particular focus on movement that separates children from parents and wider families, considering factors such as the interrelationship between climate change, violence in the family, and movement, and the particular impacts of climate change on kinship care and kinship carers' capacity to care for children.

Advocacy

- Using evidence to advocate at the national level on policies related to climate change, migration, and children on the move, and sharing experiences on how to advocate effectively with government on these issues.
- Advocating with regional bodies, and initiatives such as the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children, and in bilateral agreements between South Asian countries on climate change, migration, and children on the move.²¹⁸
- Using evidence on impacts of climate change on child movement and vulnerability to advocate at an international level for more funds to South Asian/lower income countries.

Moving ahead, Family members could consider one or a few areas of focus related to children on the move and climate change. The first step could be to explore this area through programme documentation and primary and secondary research in order to generate an evidence base for advocacy. It is suggested that the selected area(s) of focus should be in areas in which members have unique insights and where the network as a whole has a strong reputation and capacity to influence.

Given Family's focus on preventing and responding to family separation, it may be strategic to focus on movement that leads to a loss of parental care and/or family separation. Research could examine the nature and drivers of this movement, and its impact on children's wellbeing, crucially considering whether and how this movement can occur in a way that is safe and does not damage wellbeing. Research should place a strong emphasis on understanding this movement from children's perspectives. Documentation could be used to identify effective strategies for preventing such movement, and for ensuring that it is as safe as possible, with a focus on the community-based responses that Family members excel in. Advocacy could centre on policy change and investments at the national and regional level based on these findings.

It is recognised that these activities may require further fundraising. To keep the momentum going whilst funds are raised, low-cost, remote learning exchanges could be organised which would enable

²¹⁸ Experts interviewed for this report confirm that regional bodies are increasingly recognising the regional impacts of climate change and seeking to join forces to address these challenges. Limits to the effectiveness of regional strategies was also acknowledged, with some experts highlighting huge differences in the impacts of climate change between and within countries.

members to improve their practice, and could be used as a starting point for documentation. There are multiple areas where members could exchange learning. For example:

- Strengthening families to prevent separation and support reintegration in the face of climate change
- Supporting the mental health of children on the move in the context of climate change.
- Responding to the vulnerabilities of children migrating without families in the context of climate change.
- Recognising and responding to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups of children on the move, such as those with disabilities.
- Supporting kinship carers in the context of climate change.

Annexe 1: List of resources reviewed

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Annexe 2: List of interviewees

Bangladesh

- 12 children with disabilities (6 male and 6 female)

Nepal

- Dr. Dijan Bhattarai, Under-secretary and spokesperson, National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority
- Reena Chaudhary, Environment Inspector and GEDSI Focal, National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority
- Representative from Children as Zone of Peace
- 10 children