“Profoundly concerned that the situation of children in many parts of the world remains critical as a result of inadequate social conditions, natural disasters, armed conflicts, exploitation, illiteracy, hunger and disability, and convinced that urgent and effective national and international action is called for”

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is intended to guarantee children their inalienable rights in all circumstances. As indicated in the preamble, during natural disasters, when children are at their most vulnerable, these rights need to be enforced by the State and other parties dealing with the emergency in question.

According to the World Disasters Report of 2001, about 66·5 million children were affected by natural disasters in every year of the previous decade, considerably more than in the decade before; while 10 million children were affected by conflict. Exactly how many children were among the 300 000 victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami of December, 2004, is not known, but an estimate of 100 000 is cautious. This figure would have been greatly reduced had more information and skills related to disaster reduction and response been available.

In the aftermath of a disaster, ensuring the survival of children should be, and generally is, a priority of relief agencies and governments, with UNICEF and other child-focused agencies who arrive on the scene of a disaster undertaking rapid assessments to ascertain health and nutrition needs. The *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response Manual,* contains comprehensive guidelines and standards, covering disaster assistance with respect to water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and site planning, and health services, which echo the rights and duties enshrined in international law in which States and other parties have established obligations.

The response to the destruction of fresh-water supplies by the tsunami emphasised the importance of emergency preparedness. In Banda Aceh, on the island of Sumatra, Indonesia, 70% of the water supply system was damaged. In Sri Lanka and southern India, wells, water pipes, hand pumps, and public taps were destroyed. The potential for water-borne diseases was avoided by the rapid provision of clean drinking water by relief agencies and education about hand washing and personal hygiene. However, meeting physical survival needs is not sufficient to ensure that the experience of a disaster does not impair children’s mental, social, and emotional development. The findings of several studies have suggested disaster interventions rarely consider children holistically as the Convention indicates they should.

During the 1990s, the CRC undoubtedly increased recognition of the importance of the provision of education and of psychosocial and protective measures for children and adolescents in emergencies. It also emphasised the point that a child is both a “vulnerable human being that requires protection and assistance” and an individual who “is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions, to intervene as a partner in the process of social change and in the building of democracy”. As a result, child-rights based agencies are beginning to involve children in the development of processes for disaster recovery. Indeed, since children often constitute a large proportion of the affected population in disasters, ignoring their capacity means undermining that of the community as a whole to cope with the situation.

Plan International consulted more than 300 children aged 7–17 years in communities in India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand that were affected by the tsunami to find out how they were involved in the disaster response. Representatives of relief agencies were also consulted. Exposure to the tsunami and the loss of family, friends, homes, schools, and communities affected all who survived. Many children played a part in the rescue and emergency stages of the aftermath that has hardly been acknowledged. Nevertheless, a year on, young people are frustrated and disempowered by the long delays in rebuilding homes, schools, and family
We need to see children both as beneficiaries—their valuable action or reaction that is already taking place. Humanitarian actors might undermine or destroy participating to the highest degree. Inadvertently children and young people perceive themselves to be children and young people is difficult if not impossible, agencies agree that considering the participation of presents a paradox: at a time when humanitarian fast-moving, non-participatory practices that undermine technical and sectoral agencies, which in turn strengthen and centralise the power and authority of the ability of communities to respond. This development strengthens the potential of those affected, including children, to take charge of events. Children acted instinctively when faced with the disaster and used whatever skills and knowledge they had to save themselves and help others. In their accounts, the children speak of rescuing younger and older people, applying first aid, taking injured people to hospital, and searching for family members (panel). In the temporary and permanent camps, they took on roles looking after older and younger people, collecting food, queuing for water, and cleaning kitchens, toilets, and bathrooms.

Every new disaster brings renewed demands for a swifter response, but the danger is that such requests strengthen and centralise the power and authority of the technical and sectoral agencies, which in turn strengthen fast-moving, non-participatory practices that undermine the ability of communities to respond. This development presents a paradox: at a time when humanitarian agencies agree that considering the participation of children and young people is difficult if not impossible, children and young people perceive themselves to be participating to the highest degree. Inadvertently humanitarian actors might undermine or destroy valuable action or reaction that is already taking place. We need to see children both as beneficiaries—their basic rights to survival, development, and protection must be fulfilled—and as actors—providing useful knowledge of their communities, neighbourhoods, and family assets, and actively contributing to disaster relief and recovery efforts.

The results of the study by Plan International indicate that the active involvement of children can mitigate the loss of life and assets that results from natural disasters, and that children’s involvement is essential to the recovery of the community in the short-term, medium-term, and long-term. The children consulted have clear ideas about the information, knowledge, and skills that they and their communities need to be better prepared for future disasters; all we have to do is listen.

Conflict of interest statement
We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

References