



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

Summary of findings and proposed next steps
January 2025

Climate change is having a major impact on the lives of children and their families in South Asia and across the world, including in relation to migration and displacement. It has led to sea level rises, melting of glaciers, extreme weather events, droughts, and is exacerbating conflict and 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.

Family for Every Child member organisations from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka (see Annexe) have been working together to gain a better understanding of how climate change is impacting children on the move within their own communities and countries, as well as regionally in South Asia. With this, they hope to plan joint action to promote the rights and protection of children on the move in the context of climate change.

In 2024, an extensive literature review was conducted which looked at the relationship between climate change impacts and the movement of children and families in the four countries and in South Asia more widely. In addition, Member organisations carried out consultations with children, families and key informants within their own countries to enable a deeper understanding of the dynamics, consequences and experiences of climate-related movement. These were focused on children or communities who faced specific vulnerabilities, for example children with disabilities in Bangladesh, street-connected children in Nepal, and families living in the Sundarbans region in India- an area particularly affected by the impacts of climate change. Whilst these consultations were only conducted on a small scale, they provide important insights into the complex nature of climate change impacts on specific communities, particularly in relation to children's care.

Findings

There is powerful 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.

Evidence also indicates 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-related impacts, typically to urban areas. Children also move alone, to live on the streets, to work, or because they have been trafficked. There has also been an increase in girls' movement for child marriage in some settings.

The findings show that 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.

At the same time, 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.

Evidence from this and other studies also indicate the importance of several key principles that must guide any actions responding to children's movement in the context of climate change:¹

- ❖ **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 governments 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 as 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;

¹ Main sources: this study and [FAO, RMIT University \(2023\)](#); [UNICEF \(2022\)](#)

- ❖ **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.

Proposed next steps

During 2025 Family for Every Child's member organisations will utilise the research to plan several actions relating to our three main pathways to change and thematic priorities, in collaboration with other organisations and stakeholders. Actions that are being considered are:

Research

As most research focuses on adults there is an urgent need for participatory research to represent the experiences and views of children affected by climate change, and for this evidence to be presented to and heeded by decision-makers at local, national and international levels.

Further research and sharing of existing evidence on common drivers and impacts of children's movement in the context of climate change is also needed. 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, children's movement for work, 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 governments on these issues. There is a particular need to promote governmental and donor acknowledgement of the inseparable link between climate change and child protection/child rights;
- Advocating with regional bodies, and working with 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;
- 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.

Documenting and learning exchange

- Documenting and sharing practice on supporting the mental health of children on the move in the context of climate change;
- Sharing experience on awareness raising within families and communities 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;
- Strengthening families to prevent separation and support reintegration in the face of climate change;
- Responding to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups of children on the move, such as those with disabilities;
- Strategies to understand and support children involved in cross-border movement;
- Supporting kinship carers in the context of climate change.

Annexe: Members of Family for Every Child involved in the research

Bangladesh: **Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID)**, Dhaka, supports vulnerable children, with a special focus on children with disabilities. CSID has conducted research into the links between disability and vulnerability/resilience to climate shocks and stressors. CSID is currently working on resilience building and climate change, and is conducting national-level advocacy to make policy related to climate change more disability inclusive.

Bangladesh: The **Association for Community Development (ACD)** works to establish the rights of women and children in Bangladesh by promoting social justice and developing community-care support mechanisms across 19 districts in North-western Bangladesh. ACD coordinates disaster management committees, including committees to ensure the rights of children, in vulnerable and indigenous communities to address the issues of climate change and its impact on the lives of children and families.

India: **Praajak** works on a range of child protection issues as enablers for children's empowerment in their communities, and has been working on the effects of climate change on safe migration of children in two major ecologically unsettled zones in India, namely, the Sundarbans and the North Bengal Tea Gardens. Praajak's work centres around mentoring and developing capacities of grassroots organisations working on climate change and its impact on children in these areas.

Nepal: **Voice of Children (VoC)** works with children living on the streets, as well as with families and wider communities in the urban slum communities where many children on the streets come from. In its work VoC has noted that climate related issues have caused an increase in street-connected children.

Sri Lanka: **Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD)** works to tackle the factors influencing poverty and poor living conditions in order to strengthen families and to prevent family separation. While FISD has not done specific programming related to climate change, the issue is cross cutting to all of its work on child protection in Sri Lanka.