



**A TIME OF  
TRANSITION:  
ADOLESCENTS IN  
HUMANITARIAN  
SETTINGS**

**A time of transition:  
Plan International's work with and for adolescents in  
humanitarian settings**

***Executive Summary***

**Photo Credit: Gurufoto / Plan International**

# Introduction

**“A time of Transition: Adolescents in Emergencies”** is a resource aimed at emergency response staff. It examines the variations and approaches taken by different actors in defining the concept of adolescence. It also looks at how those definitions change over time as a result of emergency events. The report provides recommendations on how Plan International UK should conceptualise adolescence, emphasizing the need for a flexible approach to ensure that the risks faced by this particularly vulnerable group, which are often overlooked, are addressed.

The report also looks at the specific needs of adolescents, particularly in humanitarian settings, with regard to specific concerns such as child protection, adolescents on the move, SRHR, education, livelihoods, nutrition WASH, Climate Change and other issues.

It provides considerations for programming that programme staff may take into account when designing emergency responses.

The report also gives an overview of what Plan International has been doing with regard to adolescents looking at a sample of 9 country programmes. It provides useful insights on approaches taken for the targeting of adolescents during emergencies, programme implementation methods used, main sectors of intervention and main challenges met. The research also included what others agencies are doing for adolescents in emergencies, including donors.

Finally, the report also provides detailed recommendations that staff may use to guide their programming when targeting adolescents in emergencies.

## Why this report?

Adolescents – defined as **those between the ages of 10 and 19** by the United Nations – in 2014 numbered **1.2 billion**<sup>1</sup> – making up a little over **16% of the world's population**.<sup>2</sup> By far the majority of these adolescents, that is **88%, live in low-income and middle-income countries**.<sup>3</sup> 19% of the population in low- and middle-income countries falls within this age group.<sup>4</sup> Almost one in every six adolescents globally lives in a low-income country.<sup>5</sup> **The youth population, 10 – 24 year olds, is growing fastest in the poorest nations**.<sup>6</sup> There are **1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24**.<sup>7</sup> A significant trend is the **urbanisation of adolescent populations**.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child explains the equal rights of all children, there is growing awareness among donors, UN agencies, and NGO actors that **activities that look to support all children from 0 to 18 years old may not deliver the impact intended**, as they do not account for the variable vulnerabilities within this population. This is in part due to the fact that in much humanitarian action **practitioners take a generic approach to addressing the needs of children**, believing that broad interventions will be able to reach the needs of all boys and girls 0 to 18 years old – including young children, adolescents, and youth. **In some cases child protection actors include individuals up to the age of 25 in their interventions**. Parents and caregivers of the children they work with may also at times be

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<sup>1</sup> van der Gaag, Nikki (2013) Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2013: In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls AND Disasters, Plan International

<sup>2</sup> WHO (date unknown) Demographic situation/ trends/ projections: Adolescent population (10-19 years old) by WHO regions, 2012, available at: [http://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section/section\\_1/level1\\_2\\_page2.php](http://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section/section_1/level1_2_page2.php)

<sup>3</sup> WHO (date unknown) Demographic situation/ trends/ projections: Trends in adolescent population by income level of countries, 1950-2050, available at: [http://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section/section\\_1/level1\\_2\\_page3.php](http://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section/section_1/level1_2_page3.php)

<sup>4</sup> Robert E Black, Cesar G Victora, Susan P Walker, Zulfiqar A Bhutta, Parul Christian, Mercedes de Onis, Majid Ezzati, Sally Grantham-McGregor, Joanne Katz, Reynaldo Martorell, Ricardo Uauy (June 2013) Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries, available at: [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)60937-X/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)60937-X/fulltext)

<sup>5</sup> Robert E Black, Cesar G Victora, Susan P Walker, Zulfiqar A Bhutta, Parul Christian, Mercedes de Onis, Majid Ezzati, Sally Grantham-McGregor, Joanne Katz, Reynaldo Martorell, Ricardo Uauy (June 2013) Maternal and child undernutrition and overweight in low-income and middle-income countries, available at: [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)60937-X/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)60937-X/fulltext)

<sup>6</sup> UNFPA (2014) The Power of 1.8 Billion: Adolescents, Youth and the Transformation of the Future: The State of World Population 2014

<sup>7</sup> UNFPA (2014) The Power of 1.8 Billion: Adolescents, Youth and the Transformation of the Future: The State of World Population 2014

<sup>8</sup> In 2009, around 50 per cent of the world's adolescents lived in urban areas. By 2050, this share will rise to almost 70 per cent, with the strongest increases occurring in developing countries - UNICEF (2011) Demographic trends for adolescents: Ten key facts, available at: <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2011/pdfs/Demographic-Trends.pdf>

beneficiaries of activities. **Decisions about who to target appear haphazard and unstudied.**

This has been coupled with **a limited analysis of the diverging needs of girls and boys**,<sup>9</sup> and the subsequent impact this may have on the design of suitable interventions for the different sub-groups of children. **Certain vulnerable groups are also often rendered invisible** when actors take a generic approach to addressing children's needs. For example it is felt that little regard is given to the forms of protection concerns faced by those with disabilities, children from minority linguistic, religious or ethnic groups, those with different socio-political or economic status, or how threats may vary depending on sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, actors share the perspective that humanitarian prevention and response **programming is not sufficiently or systematically tailored to the requirements of all the diverse subgroups** included within the category of children, and approaches are not consistent in terms of quality. Specifically, recent humanitarian action has highlighted **the need to more rigorously include the perspectives and consider needs of adolescents in crisis situations**. This has led to recent commitments specifically to address the needs of adolescents and youth.<sup>11</sup>

**Plan International UK** commissioned the development of this report in order to better clarify and develop:

- A conceptualisation of adolescence, based on Plan's policy and programme work
- Summarise the data available on the needs of adolescents in times of crises
- Map out the work Plan are doing with and for adolescents in humanitarian action
- Identify trends in the work other agencies and donors are doing with and for adolescents
- Propose recommendations for Plan's future work for adolescents in humanitarian actions

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<sup>9</sup> Women's Refugee Commission (2014) I'm here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies: Approach and tools for improved response

<sup>10</sup> Based on discussions held with Key informants and literature reviewed during the course of this research. See for example reports by WRC: Women's Refugee Commission (2014) I'm here: Adolescent Girls in Emergencies: Approach and tools for improved response, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children (OSRSG/VAC) (May 2013) Breaking the Silence on Violence against Indigenous Girls, Adolescents and Young Women, and Plan UK and Plan Sweden (May 2015) Plan Strengthening Support to LGBTIQ Adolescents: Policy Report on the Rationale and Scope for Strengthening Support to Adolescents Who Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning

<sup>11</sup> For example the World Humanitarian Summit (2016) Compact For Young People In Humanitarian Action and the UN (2014) Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 2014: 69/187. Migrant children and adolescents, A/RES/69/187

## Methodology

The report was based on a literature review and key informant interviews. The four main sources of reference material were:

- Published reports, data, analysis and research from multi-lateral and UN agencies, donors, and NGOs presenting information on the situation of children broadly and adolescents specifically
- Academic journals and publications
- Grey literature giving details of programme design, outcomes and impact
- Programming guidance and tools from international NGOs, inter-agency groups, and donors

Data and research information were drawn from approximately 120 sources, references, publications and websites.

In addition, a total of 34 interviewees were involved in 20 interviews. Key informant interviews were carried out with:

- Plan country staff implementing programmes that either specifically target adolescents, or include adolescents within their target group – staff involved represented the offices in Central African Republic, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Nepal, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania (17 interviewees)
- Child, or adolescent specialists from within donor agencies offices for DFID, ECHO, USAID/OFDA (3 interviewees)
- UN agencies implementing significant adolescent programmes – UNHCR, and UNICEF (3 interviewees)
- Key NGO agencies implementing, researching, and developing guidance on working with adolescents: IRC, Save the Children, War Child, Women's Refugee Commission (5 interviewees)
- Plan UK head office staff (6 interviewees)



# Main findings

## Defining adolescence

- How adolescence is understood?

The term “adolescence” refers to a **specific phase of life within the process of a child’s development**. The term is **understood differently depending on the specific cultural and social context**. Here it is considered to describe children, both girls and boys, who are in a stage of development that occurs between the beginning of puberty – the period or age when a person starts to be capable of sexual reproduction – and the beginning of adulthood. At the level of the child it is a period of rapid and profound physical and mental change. **These changes inherent to the child affect external factors in their lives**, such as their relationships with peers, and family, their roles within their community, the daily activities in which adolescents engage, and their levels of financial, political, and social responsibility.

*Given that adolescence relates to how intrinsic changes lead to external shifts, there is significant variation in how the term adolescence is interpreted or applied as outer environments and contexts vary and change over time.*

- How adolescence may be defined?

Definitions for adolescence may be in relation to:

- specific age classifications (age graded definitions of adolescence)
- established through more complex means (process definitions of adolescence) based on and relating to certain physical, mental and functional transitions.<sup>12</sup>

- How crisis/emergencies affect those definitions?

The signs of transition may change or the timing of these transitions may be adjusted. It is felt that crises, and/or the humanitarian response that ensues, may impact on the phasing of adolescence in three main ways:

- **Crises may alter the processes of transition that existed before**, either by cop-opting, accentuating, or removing them entirely
- **Precipitate or accelerate the time of transition**
- **Delay or extend the period of transition**

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<sup>12</sup> Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2005) “Don’t Forget Us”: The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad

- How Plan International should define adolescence?

Plan International may wish to provide a **globally agreed summary of how Plan and other key actors – including donors – conceptualise adolescents**. This should include the age-graded definition provided in *The State of the World's Girls* (**10 – 19 years old**). However, it should be **considered presenting this as flexible** and reinforce the fact **that this will differ based on context**.

- Process for contextualised definitions of adolescence

- Discussion with a range of stakeholders (for example young children: in two groups 7-10 and 10-14; older children: 14 – 18; and youth: 18 – 25; parents; and key members of the community: religious leaders teachers, medical personnel etc.) to establish if the concept of a transition phase between childhood and adulthood (i.e. adolescence) exists?



- If yes, identify the key characteristics of these transitions from childhood, to adolescence, and then to adulthood. Ensure this is a discussion that takes into account differences according to gender identity.



- Then identify a context specific age range for transition by discussing locally what are the ages at which children typically go through these transitions. This needs to also identify any variation between girls, boys, and those who are LGBTIQ.

## What are the specific needs of adolescents generally, and in humanitarian settings specifically?

In 2012, overall there were an estimated **1.3 million adolescent deaths**, most of them from causes that could have been prevented or treated. **Mortality is higher in boys than in girls and in older adolescents (15–19 years) than in younger adolescents (10–14 years)**. While there are many causes of mortality common to



boys and girls, violence is a particular problem in boys and maternal causes in girls.<sup>13</sup>

**Adolescents, due to their unique stage of development, are particularly susceptible to certain forms of threats and risks** that create certain support needs specific to them. In humanitarian settings needs may change, or new areas of concern may arise.

Some of the key concerns of adolescents in emergencies range from **child protection issues, health, education, and nutrition, to livelihoods, and WASH.** Many overlap, and intersect. New issues are continuously arising, resulting from changes in the external environment. The economy, political, and social context, and also new technologies all play a part in the nature of the challenges faced by older children. Children's internal physical and emotional characteristics are also shifting as they respond to these external factors. Humanitarian events, both natural disasters and conflict, may exacerbate these concerns and present new ones.

Adolescents are trapped between childhood and adulthood. They are not cared for, protected and nurtured to the extent younger children are, and they are not given the agency, voice, and influence of adults.

## Key recommendations

- ① **Define adolescence:** Clarify and document how Plan policy, advocacy and programme work should define adolescence
- ② **Target adolescents:** Set out a brief guidance document on the way that Plan will seek to target adolescents
- ③ **Learning and exchange:** Set up a learning and exchange group internal to Plan staff allowing lessons learnt to be exchanged informally – this may be through on-line social media platforms or e-mail groups.
- ④ **Prepare a staff capacity matrix:** Create a mapping or matrix with details of existing staff who have specific areas of expertise on adolescents who are willing to be contacted in case country offices are seeking support on certain topics. A simple table with name, location, contact details, and areas of expertise would suffice. This should be shared through the internal exchange platforms
- ⑤ **Map interagency tools and resources:** Assess and map out existing tools and resources, produced by all agencies, compiling them based on criteria, and disseminating the tools to programme staff. Make them available either on line on a website, through the sharing platform, or on a memory stick
- ⑥ **Quarterly updates:** Through the learning and exchange platform share regular updates on resources, initiatives, working groups, advocacy, and policy activities that Plan is engaged in at a global, regional and national level – so as to improve inter-linkages, learning, and exchange. Also any new resources that have been published and disseminated
- ⑦ **Link policy and practice:** Ensure stronger links between programming activities and policy and research carried out by the organisation. Including through more rigorous and systematic data collection through the life cycle of programmes that feeds into policy papers. As well as more evidence-based practices in relation to testing out programme initiatives and influencing programme design that may lead to resource and tool development. Mechanisms should also be put in place to ensure the recommendations outlined in core policy documents and publications are fed into country level programme design processes
- ⑧ **Document lessons learnt:** Carry out field level research in a sample of locations to evaluate and document lessons learnt on programme work for adolescents
- ⑨ **Prepare a capacity statement:** Based on the above process for gathering information on lessons learnt, (or possibly based on the findings of this report if this is considered adequate) prepare a Plan International capacity statement on work with adolescents.