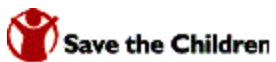


# EFFECTS OF NATURAL DISASTERS ON CHILDREN

## The issue of child drowning in the Mekong delta and the Central Vietnam



## I. General Issues

1. Purpose: this research aims to provide some information to clarify the situation relating to child drowning. Specifically:
  - a) Why did children drown?
  - b) In what circumstances did children drown?
  - c) How to prevent children drowning?
  
2. Methodology:
  - 2.1 Scope:
    - Information on *households*, including *family heads*, other *adult family members* and *children*
    - Information on *districts*, *communes*, and *wards*
  
  - 2.2 Research tools:
    - a) In-depth interview of households with drowned children
    - b) In-depth interview of households without drowned children (control households)
    - c) Children focus group discussion guide
    - d) Interview of commune/ward leaders
  
  - 2.3 Research techniques: The research combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches:
    - Reviewing secondary data such as reports, plans of actions, local socio-economic development strategy and plans, available statistics.
    - Semi-structured interviews with family heads and family members
    - Observations
    - Tape-recording
    - Photograph-recording
  
  - 2.4 Sampling:
    - Sample size: 75 households with and 75 household without drowned children were randomly and purposively selected. Information was gathered at provincial, district, commune, and household levels, while the survey locations were selected to include upstream, mid-stream, and downstream communities.
  
  - 2.5 Document review and field survey design
  
  - 2.6 Field work: training and data collection
    - 2-day orientation training (including tool pre-tests)
    - Data collection duration: from 17<sup>th</sup> June to 18<sup>th</sup> July 2003 and from 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> August 2003
    - Data collectors: 6
  
  - 2.7 Monitoring and supervision:
    - Save the Children Alliance

## 2.8 Data processing and reporting

From mid August to end of September 2003

### **II. Executive Conclusions and Recommendations:**

#### 1. Main findings:

*Household size.* Drowned children were mainly of 4-member households, i.e parents and 2 children without grandparents. Children living in these households face with a high risk as they may not have someone to care for them when the parents are absent.

*Housing and surroundings.* Most of the drowning took place in the children's own houses and immediately surrounding areas (68%): on the floor in the house or in the garden area. These houses are simply built and have many potential risks (70.7%). The specific elements of the house design (e.g. unfenced rear door, strongly sloppy stair, lack of clear demarcation signals between land and water...) means that children are at risk even when they are being supervised by an adult.

*Economic gap and poverty.* The areas where most of the drowning cases occurred are poor, with ownership of only basic goods, particularly in families with drowned children. While there are clear inequalities in income distribution, in fact income appeared to be less equally distributed in the control families than in the families with drowned children.

*Land distribution.* In general families of drowned children had either no land or little land, forcing them to work as wage labourers. The wealthiest 20% of the sampled households owned approximately 70% of the total land in the sample.

*Literacy.* The literacy rate of households with drowned children was low. In these households, 19.3% adults aged above 15 were illiterate (while the figure was 10.8% in control households). 20% of household heads were illiterate while the figure was 42.9% in female-headed households.

*Age.* A majority of the drowned children were aged under 6. In households of wage labourers, the under 6 group accounts for 82.3% of drowning cases.

*Timing of deaths and livelihoods.* Drowning took place primarily during the daytime: in the morning between 7:30 and 12am (43.9%) and in the afternoon between noon and 4:30pm (45.5%). Among children who drowned in the afternoon, there were as many as 42.9% who died between 3 pm and 4 pm.

Children from wage-labouring households drowned in the morning and early morning (68.42%) while other cases happened in the afternoon (54.35%). Thus livelihoods have a direct impact on child drowning in floods.

*Timing of deaths during the flood season.* 56% of child drownings occurred in September when both upstream and downstream districts of the Mekong river delta were flooded. 35.6% of drownings happened in the first month of flood season (usually lasting between 15 and 25 days). In this period households without land account for a greater percentage than those with (42.9% vs. 32.7%).

The 20% of households with the least land have 50% of their drowning cases in the first month whereas it was 26.7% for the 20% of households with the highest land access.

*Life skills.* 84% of drowned children were unable to swim. As many as 32% of total interviewed children said that they learnt swimming themselves, without assistance of parents or adults. Children who could swim often go swimming with their friends or with older brothers/sisters. It was acknowledged that in the absence of adults, this kind of behavior presents a potential risk.

*Child care centres.* Though local child care centres established during the flood seasons, many households did not pay adequate attention at sending their children to these centres. Nevertheless, it is worth raising some identified difficulties faced by child-care centres:

- Meal costs
- Child-care centres are far from households
- Poor households had no transportation means to take/pick up children to/from child-care centres
- It was believed that the numbers of child care centres would rapidly decrease.

*What did children say?* During flood seasons risk of drowning is ever present, whether children are playing or working. There is a sense of fear, particularly in people whose friends/relatives have drowned. Children all report wanting more care and attention from adults.

*Local disaster preparedness plans.* District and communal plan of actions for Emergency and Relief remain insufficient, with a lack of clear responsibilities towards the issue of child drowning.

→ *A lesson learnt from Ha Tinh.* A flash flood took place in Huong Son District, Ha Tinh Province from and lasted for 5 days (18 to 22 September 2002). This caused severe damages. However, only one child aged above 17 died among 32 casualties (3%). A survey in Huong Son showed that housing conditions, prevention measures and the social safety net were key factors explaining the low number of drowned children.

## 2. Recommendations

### 2.1 Policies

- Land policies/ land law for farming households with little or no land

- Policies to develop a system of kindergartens for pre-school aged children
- Develop systematic and appropriate preventive measures to protect children from the risk of drowning; complete guideline documents for preparedness and prevention of accidents and also for first aid for drowning children
- Have specific policies which help to create resources to carry out activities to protect children from drowning.
- Recommendation on the staffing of the Committee for Flood and Storms Control. Information on floods and storms has not been collected and managed systematically and efficiently from central to local levels.

## 2.2 Monitoring, experiences assessment and dissemination

- have monitoring system based on the statistics and CPFC
- have criteria/ indicators for reporting

## 2.3 Information Communication

- Documenting materials to disseminate experiences in order to better inform child drowning prevention efforts, particularly at the local level
- Education efforts about drowning prevention need to be more concrete and clearer in the plans of the CCFSC and it needs to directly reach the families, particularly the poor and landless families.
- Poor families often don't have opportunities to access information because they are busy of earning a living and because of low education levels, therefore it is necessary to have alternative appropriate approaches:
- Radio, TV: have information integrated in the program of films or traditional song and advertisements.
- Flyers, leaflets: should be displayed with pictures, not much wording.
- Staff should visit each household on the list to check on the situation and to provide guidance.
- Develop detailed guidelines for families and local staff for child drowning prevention.

## 2.4 Training courses on swimming and providing first aid for drowning people

Set up a programme of swimming training for children and method to offer first aid for drowning child. It's necessary to have participation and coordination between mass organisations and agencies such as: schools, the Youth Union, Women's Union and the Red Cross.

## 2.5 Coordination:

Clear roles and responsibilities should be delegated to the competent authorities on the issue of child drowning. The responsibilities of the CPFC, Women's Union, and the hamlet chairman should be emphasized.

## 2.6 Emergency response activities:

Prioritize food aid to childcare centers. There should be more continuous support for poor families.

2.7 Expand the application of child participation in developing plans of action and implementing monitoring regarding child drowning prevention efforts.

2.8 Finalize the current study.

2.9 Conduct additional research into the issue of child drowning as identified in the final report of this research.

Conduct research on a larger scale.

Conduct qualitative research on the social impact of child drowning on the rights of the child, for example children (especially girls) dropping out of school to care for their younger sibling because of the threat of child drowning.

More research on the socio-economic factors relating to child drowning.