

The NGO view: protecting children from disasters

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Interviewee: [Bethan Lewis](#) – Head of Humanitarian Unit,
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Image source: Plan International UK

Bethan,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about the work of [Plan International UK](#), and your work to advance children's rights and equality for girls (I know that the global Plan International organisation is active in dozens of countries around the world). I am keen to hear about the work of your organisation to support and protect children, with a particular focus on how they can best be supported when they are caught up in different types of disasters.

Can we start this interview with an overview of Plan International UK, and your current activities and areas of focus?

***Bethan:** Delighted to be here, Gareth. As you point out, [Plan International UK](#) is part of the global family that is [Plan International](#). We are a global children's charity, working with children in some of the world's poorest countries and disaster-prone communities. Our aim is for every child, especially girls, to know their value.*

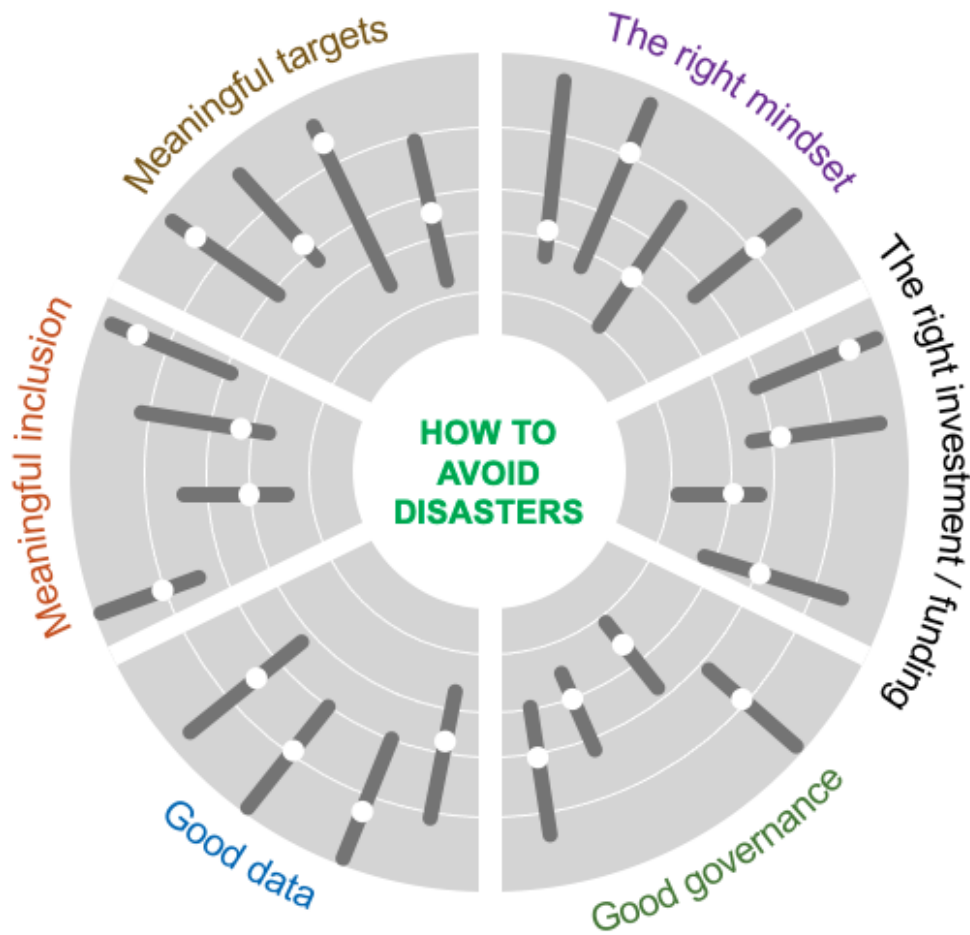
On a broad basis, the thematic areas for [Plan International UK](#) are (1) climate, (2) the environment and resilience, and (3) working for children, especially girls, on education, protection from violence, sexual and reproductive health, with a strong gender component. I'd like to mention that, we use a cash and voucher modality in our programming wherever possible as well

My role is specifically related to humanitarian programming, which is a key and growing part of Plan International's work. To give some context, in 2022 Plan International responded to around 150 humanitarian crises around the world, and Plan International UK's Humanitarian Unit takes a lead role in the Plan family's humanitarian work through the core technical areas we work in, including mobilising funds and resources to scale up humanitarian interventions.

Alongside our humanitarian work, we focus on disaster risk support to equip communities to prepare for and anticipate disaster threats and hazards, and to keep children safe and able, as best they can, to continue with education and some form of normalcy when disaster situations loom and occur. We have a leading role in supporting Plan International's anticipatory action work with a particular focus on protection, gender and inclusion.

Gareth: Thanks for mentioning the [anticipatory action](#) part of what you do, Bethan. I know the IFRC has described this type of action focus as “*actions taken to reduce the humanitarian impacts of a forecast hazard before it occurs, or before its most acute impacts are felt. The decision to act is based on a forecast, or collective risk analysis, of when, where and how the event will unfold*”.

I can see a lot of linkages to what you have described just now about your focus areas and [the six points in our model](#) of our Disasters Avoided initiative. How to protect children factors into all six of our model points.



[The Disasters Avoided model](#): G Byatt, I Kelman & A Prados

Gareth: Our model also links to [the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030](#) and [the Sustainable Development Goals](#) (the SDGs). I use the SDGs in various ways, and I find they are a good set of goals for everyone to use. You mentioned gender equality and education just now, and I have seen in the [Plan International UK Strategy 2021-2023](#) that the SDGs are very much stitched into your activities. Are there particular areas of the SDGs that you focus on, and maybe also as well?

Bethan: *Certainly. We are currently finalising our new strategy for Plan International UK. As is the case with our existing strategy, everything we do is aimed at contributing meaningfully to the delivery of the SDGs, particularly for people who are most vulnerable to being left behind. I touched upon our thematic areas just now; more broadly (with a little bit of repeating some key points, if you don't mind), our key focus areas all count towards the SDGs, including quality of education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), food security, resilient economic empowerment (SDG 8), sexual and reproductive health (SDG 3) and protection against violence (SDG 16 and others). In the past five years we have looked to strengthen our work on climate justice and action (SDG 13), and locally led environmental resilience.*

You mentioned the Sendai Framework as well. We are aligned to the Framework priorities for action, especially awareness about disaster risk, strengthening governance, investing in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and enhancing preparedness. These are all key for our humanitarian and development work.

Gareth: Thanks for this context to your linkages to the SDGs and the Sendai Framework. I'd like to return to the point you mentioned about anticipatory action. We talk with many people who lament the insufficient amount of investment going into preventative action. We all know that resources are scarce, but we wonder if this situation can change, so that upfront investment, including looking at how to protect the rights of children, is seen as an important imperative.

***Bethan:** Indeed, it is not a new discussion as we know. I remember working on a project in 2012-2013 in Mozambique, and there were some successes on it, but the challenge to secure the funding for upfront action is still a challenge in many parts of the world. I think we need to keep working on this, and not lose our focus or commitment towards it.*

Gareth: What are some of the key focus areas that policy makers and governments should focus on to care for children in disadvantaged situations as part of investing in and managing disaster risk? How can they best support children through good policy, and through different channels, from local to national and international?

***Bethan:** it is an interesting question. The first point I would emphasise is to advocate to recognise all the many links between global frameworks that exist, and to promote coherence across them. In terms of key areas, Plan International has a child-centred focus, and we know that children are being impacted by climate change in various ways.*

As we touched upon just now, funding for risk reduction remains low. When you look at child-responsive disaster risk reduction measures, it is an even smaller proportion. [The child environmental rights initiative](#) did some research into this in terms of how much money goes to multilateral funding for children. For us, the focus on children is key. For example, how do we involve children in planning and decision-making processes, how do we continue to strengthen work across the education sector for disaster preparedness and (linked) climate change, and how do we ensure that child critical social services are funded to play their role to cope and recover from disasters and emergencies.

Gareth: What do you feel works well to get the input and involvement from children towards these objectives and what's required? UNICEF describes [how children are actively playing a part to reduce disaster and climate risk](#), including involvement in risk assessments, early warning systems, community action, school evacuation protocols and recovery plans.

Is there more that you would like to see, whether by Disaster Risk Management authorities around the world or by UN agencies or other groups, to engage children in action to avoid disasters?

Bethan: *There has been some great work in this area, especially in the education space. Schools are a critical safe space for children, providing a place for them to participate at a local level and talk about what they feel is important in the area where they live including at their own school, through to issues such as how they would engage with their local and national government. We have had some great successes working with Youth Advocates, working with young people and giving them a forum to share their voices on key issues. So, youth engagement is also important.*

Gareth: This makes me think about the different types of private sector opportunities for engagement, and also NGOs such as Engineers Without Borders.

Going back to the point about schools, school infrastructure in parts of the world plays a valuable part to provide disaster risk resilience, for example the multi-use of shelters for cyclone and flooding protection in vulnerable countries. So, there are multiple links here.

Bethan: *Absolutely. If you think of examples such as [Typhoon Yolanda](#) in the Philippines in 2013, the destruction it caused was huge and there was an urgent need immediately afterwards for emergency centres. For us as Plan International, recognising the need for shelters, we focused on the needs of children and how safe spaces can be used to access learning. As another and very different example, in Ukraine we are enabling an online forum for children to get back to learning, and to somewhat have a sense of normalcy in problematic and traumatic times. This can help them in the present and the future, for their psycho-social resilience.*

Gareth: These types of events are traumatic for adults, and arguably even more traumatic for children. You mention the online learning options, Bethan, which of course many children around the world had to adapt to use during the COVID-19 pandemic. Have online learning options improved, after being forced upon us? More broadly, I remember reading [a piece in The Conversation published in 2016](#) about helping kids deal with the traumatic experience of disasters and post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety that can occur after they are caught up in a disaster. What are some of the key areas of focus that need investment and funding today?

Bethan: *Yes, I do think we have seen improvements in online learning for children. Alongside learning, what is also crucial in a post-crisis context is investment in other aspects, including health and psycho-social needs. As we saw with COVID-19 and as we see with other disasters, learning was one aspect of children's needs. We want to ensure we have child participation into how programmes are designed, and for them to share feedback and raise complaints when they need to do so. Ensuring an integrated approach is key to achieving successful outcomes.*

Gareth: Are there some good examples of how things are taking shape, for online learning and for the broader protection and care of children in the face of disasters?

Bethan: Yes, Ukraine is one example of some positive outcomes that are being achieved in the face of huge challenges and problems. We know that adolescents continue to face huge challenges (schools have closed, many have been separated from their families, there is the important aspect of images that are available online which can impact psycho-social resilience).

Plan International works with a Ukrainian organisation called Iztok, an NGO that provides tailored psycho-social support for children and their parents, as well as informal learning, social activities for children and adolescents. It is taking place in a really challenging environment, but there are some positive outcomes being achieved.

Gareth: Something you have mentioned a few times in our interview, Bethan, is having a good feedback loop from children. It's great to hear that young people are confident that they can provide feedback and ideas.

Bethan: Yes, it is a high priority for our programming, to ensure that children feel safe to provide feedback, and that they know how their feedback will be actioned, and also that they can find out how it is being progressed. This is both in terms of ongoing programmes and inputting into new designs of new initiatives.

Gareth: You have mentioned a few countries as examples where you are actively supporting children. On the scale of cities, are there certain cities around the world that are setting a good example that other cities can learn from? I think of an example in Brazil, [the city of Sobral which has gained recognition for educational programmes](#). In my work in urban resilience which includes visiting different cities, I am always interested to see how education is being focused on.

Bethan: This is a good question. Urban programming is certainly something that Plan International is looking at strengthening.

To give you a couple of examples, places like Manilla are working on interesting programmes and learning. Accra in Ghana is another example. Others do exist, and we hope that efforts in cities around the world can and will continue.

Gareth: Ilan and I are involved in initiatives to support Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The major ten-year conference for SIDS in May 2024 in Antigua, called [SIDS4](#). I know that there is a stream for the youth voice to provide input into the conference. SIDS face different challenges with regards to the needs of children and youths. Are the lives of children on small islands part of the engagement of Plan International?

Bethan: *It's good that you mention this. The needs of children and youths on small islands are important to Plan International. We work in a number of SIDS – we have programmes in Timor-Leste, Fiji, Haiti, Dominican Republic and Guinea Bissau. We are working to support children's rights, equality for girls and promoting disaster resilience in these areas.*

In Timor-Leste, for example, we work with local authorities, communities and civil society organisations to strengthen the capacity of civil societies to prepare for and respond to the challenges of climate change, and also to promote gender sensitive and socially inclusive policies around this. Some of the interventions in Timor-Leste are to facilitate training in climate change and policy, raising awareness amongst communities, looking at environmentally sustainable income generating opportunities, and working specifically working with women and children for natural resource governance and policy process.

We also do a lot in the Dominican Republic. One of my colleagues is working on strengthening resilience to weather and climate-related hazards, which includes working to promote climate and environmental awareness, including economic empowerment.

We will be keen to share thoughts on the major SIDS4 conference taking place in May 2024. Things are moving, but the impacts to small islands are happening now and they need support.

Gareth: We touched upon some of the activities and support of the private sector earlier. In our Disasters Avoided work we liaise with businesses in different sectors to see what they are doing to help implement good disaster risk action. Are there opportunities that the private sector can meaningfully contribute towards to help programmes that support children around the world?

Bethan: *We have been working in partnership with the private sector for quite some time. Sometimes it is for funding and working with donors for various solutions. One of the things we have seen is a growing interest on climate risk and upfront action and how we best manage these with insurance. We worked on a significant programme in Senegal recently, working with the Ark replica and a major insurance business for solutions to drought and crop failure. This is an example of support provided by the insurance / financial services sector. This is certainly a valuable part of our activities moving forwards.*

Gareth: The insurance example is an interesting one, Bethan. I have spoken to people in the insurance sector about solutions to support upfront and preventative action for disaster risk and resilience, including solutions such as parametric insurance, which isn't for everyone and needs specific contextual consideration to see if it can be applied. An interview about this subject is available on the Disasters Avoided website, by the way. It's interesting for me to think about how the needs of children and youths are clear in developing models like this.

I'd like to finish with asking about your views on the on the uses of technology to support children and youths (by which I don't just mean smartphones and digital offerings) that can help them around the world? Adults can learn a lot from children, can't they.

Bethan: *First and foremost, we advocate for safe parameters to online resources, and making sure there are good parental and carers input to this. We discussed COVID-19 and online learning earlier, and this has improved. Early Warning Systems are examples of how smartphones can be valuable parts of such systems.*

We also use technology for cash programming – using online mechanisms are faster and more secure, which is a valuable modality for releasing early payments for predicted / incoming payments.

Gareth: Any final points that you'd like to emphasise / stress about the needs of children.

Bethan: *Just going back to the start of our conversation, we know that investment and effort into upfront and early action is critical. All the initiatives that we have to help focus on this need to continue to be high on the agenda.*

Thank you very much for your time, Bethan. It's inspiring to see the work of Plan International around the world to improve children's lives.