

# Access to Play for Children in Situations of Crisis

Synthesis of Research in Six Countries



**International Play Association**  
promoting the child's right to play



# International Play Association

promoting the child's right to play

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## About the International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play (IPA):

IPA is an international membership-based association with members in 50 countries worldwide. Our purpose is to protect, preserve and promote children's right to play as a fundamental human right.

**Website: [www.ipaworld.org](http://www.ipaworld.org)**

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## Acronyms

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APC	Access to Play in Crisis
ARC	Actions for the rights of the children
CCA	Climate Change Adaptation
CFS	Child Friendly Space
CYMF	Child and Youth Media Foundation
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FCD	Foundation for Child Development
GC17	General Comment no.17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (Art. 31)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPA	International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play
ITS	Informal Tented (or Temporary) Settlement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPO	Non-Profit Organization
PTP	Post-Traumatic Play
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
SES	Socio-Economic Status
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNISDR	United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for The Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UNSDSN	United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network
US	United States

# Glossary of Terms

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**Adventure Playgrounds:** Adventure playgrounds (or junk playgrounds) are spaces dedicated to children's play which first began in Denmark in the 1940s. Children use loose parts—fabric, ropes, old tyres, timber, tools – to create their own play environments and are able to make fires, dig, build – and demolish – dens and other structures. Skilled adults, known as playworkers, provide support when needed.

**Affordance:** An affordance is a quality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action. For example, whether a child chooses to sit at a table, make it into a den, or hide underneath will depend on how he or she perceives and then utilizes the affordance at that moment.

**Loose parts:** The theory of loose parts was first proposed in the 1970's by architect Simon Nicholson, who believed that it is the loose parts in our environment that empower our creativity. Loose parts can be natural or synthetic materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. Examples of loose parts: fabric, guttering, cardboard boxes and tubes, tyres, sticks, tarpaulins, string and rope.

**Play:** Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves. Play is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. It may take infinite forms but the key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Play is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood and is an essential component of children's development.

**Playwork:** The theory and practice of playwork recognises that children's play should be 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.' Playwork is the work of creating and maintaining spaces for children to play and is a skilled profession that facilitates, enriches and enhances children's play.

**Playworker:** Playworkers enable children to extend their own play and protect and enhance the play space so that it is a rich play environment. Playworkers ensure that the play space is inclusive – supporting all children to make the most of the opportunities available in their own way. They understand the need for children to encounter and create uncertainty and challenge as part of their play. Playworkers neither direct nor organise play, they are trained to judge when or whether to intervene.

**Play types:** Play types can be described as the different behaviours we can see when children are playing and there have been numerous attempts to categorise different types of play. Play theorist Bob Hughes describes each play type (social play, rough and tumble play, deep play, role play etc.) as 'both distinctly and subtly different from the others'.

**Pop-up play space/playground:** Pop-up play spaces or playgrounds are free, public celebrations of child-directed play in any community space, with loose parts (such as cardboard boxes, fabric, tape and rope etc.) and typically under the supervision of playworkers and /or community volunteers. This model claims public space for children's free play for a limited time even in contexts where little play space is available. The temporal nature of the pop-up play spaces makes them useful for bringing play to play-deprived children in most places.

**Intensive risks:** The risk associated with the exposure of large concentrations of people and economic activities to intense hazard events, which can lead to potentially catastrophic disaster impacts involving high mortality and asset loss.

**Extensive risks:** The widespread risk associated with the exposure of dispersed populations to repeated or persistent hazard conditions of low or moderate intensity, often of a highly localized nature, which can lead to debilitating cumulative disaster impacts.

# Summary of key findings

## Research context

The locations and situations of crisis represented in this research were:

1. Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture that was severely affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011.
2. Bhumlutar village in Kavre district and Kunchowk village in Sindupalchowk district in Nepal that were affected by the Gorkha Earthquake in 2015.
3. Roma majority neighborhoods of Sulukule, Tarlabasi and Kustepe in Istanbul that are being targeted by recent discriminatory development policies.
4. Informal Tented Settlements in Bekaa, Beirut, and North in Lebanon that provide shelter to Syrian refugees.
5. Nimtala Ghat squatter settlement along a railway track in Kolkata in India housing third generation, lower-caste migrants from neighbouring states.
6. Legal and illegal migrants from Burma and Cambodia in Thailand living in two urban sites near Bangkok and one rural site near the Burma border.



## Key findings

Across the situations of crisis in the six countries, children played. The nature of play was to a large extent shaped by: the age, gender and ability of the child; the nature of the space where they had access to play; the cultural and social context of the community; the time available for play and the level of parental permission for playing in certain places and at certain times. The freest play was witnessed in children under 14 years in the Burmese migrant communities in Thailand, amongst the squatters beside the railway track in Kolkata and the earthquake-hit villages of Kunchowk and Bhumlutar in Nepal.

**Age, gender and ability:** The youngest children and girls in some cultures (for example in India, Thailand and Nepal) played close to home even when the play space had high risks, such as the railway track that pierced through the squatter settlement in Kolkata. From age eight onwards boys sought out spaces away from parents' or known gazes to engage in deep and risky play such as in abandoned buildings, in a deserted dock area or on the river. In many cultures, such as in Lebanon, Nepal and India, adolescent girls had no time or permission to play and girls themselves refrained from playing, believing that they were too old to play. However, they did play imaginatively while working, using the materials at hand (such as using the cooking utensils or

clothes for washing as was seen in Kolkata) or played on their mobile phones at home in the cracks of household work as in the villages in Nepal. The schools emerged as a great equalizer of play rights if girls had access to them; in Nepal when the girls went back to school after the earthquake they had access to the school grounds where they did play traditional games and sports irrespective of social expectations and conditioning. Similarly, when parents worked far away from home, and children had access to open fields and other natural settings (Mae Sot, Thailand), girls played freely alongside boys till late adolescence. There had not been much reporting on the access to play of disabled children across the situations of crisis in this research except in Nepal where it was reported that disabled children were tied up in safe open spaces to keep them from harm while rebuilding activities went on around them.

**Nature of space and access conditions:** In all the situations of crisis, children played mostly in unsafe places even when a few safe spaces were available to them. When children, particularly younger children, played freely in the heart of the community, in places where they had permission and access to play, a range of construction play, pretend play and social play were reported. This was witnessed in the migrant communities in Kolkata and Thailand, as well as in Nepal where children had parental permission to seek out safe open spaces in the devastated post-

earthquake landscape to play with friends while parents were busy rebuilding their houses. What did the children play? They mimicked what they saw around them, and built homes with any available material just like their parents. Across the sites, it was found that the greater the risks in the local environment, the riskier was the play of children.

**Social and cultural context:** As an expressive activity, play is very much influenced by the cultural and social context of the community. In the case of the urban Cambodian migrant community in Thailand as well as one of the Roma communities in Istanbul, children were growing up in rough neighbourhoods seeing violence in the streets everyday. Their risky aggressive play in limited ways was perhaps a way of their making sense of the violence embedded in their community; it may also be indicative of internal distress. In either case it does suggest the need for specialized interventions to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities in children's lives while promoting the right to play.

**Permission:** In all the situations of crisis parents restricted play in at least some places and at certain times if not in all outdoor places and at all times. Among the research countries, the children of Japan after the earthquake and tsunami had the least permission to play, first while staying in the evacuation centres for up to six months after the disaster, and later while staying in temporary housing, when children were told by adults not to play outside. While staying in the evacuation centre, some children tried to seek out secret places such as under the bridge, where they could have contact with nature. Across the sites, children adopted different strategies to cope with lack of permission for free play (that is, play under the children's own direction and control). These ranged from turning to technology such as watching television, becoming absorbed in smart phones or playing video games on their own devices or computer games at a game shop. Coping also took the form of playing with language as was most commonly seen in the children's centres in Turkey which did not allow free play outdoors.

**Time:** Even though educational pressure was one of the biggest reasons why children did not have free time to play and this was certainly true in Japan and in Turkey, most children in this research outside of Japan and Nepal did not regularly attend formal schools or age-appropriate classes. This did not mean they had free time to play, as responsibilities of paid and unpaid work, and lack of safe spaces conspired to prevent play across the research sites in Thailand, India, Lebanon and Turkey.

**Perceptions of play:** Children everywhere typically equated play with friends, fun and freedom. Children in the earthquake-affected villages in Nepal and in the Informal Tented Settlements in Lebanon dreamed of exciting play materials to enliven their everyday play spaces. They wanted safe, large, clean play spaces filled with friends in the heart of their community. Parents' perceptions of play were different and were based mainly on their hopes for their children's future, cultural constraints on girls and fear about children's safety while outdoors. Even though some adults, such as in Nepal, said that play was important for children, by "children" they meant younger children who were not yet capable of assisting parents with household work, and this was especially true for girls.

**Attempts to promote the right to play in situations of crisis:** Across the research contexts, attempts to promote the right to play by different organizations can most notably be seen in Japan, Thailand and Lebanon and to a lesser degree in Turkey and Nepal. In India, where the freest play was witnessed in the most hazardous conditions, securing the right to play depended very much on individual creativity and resilience of children living in squatter settlements and some parents who sometimes facilitated play by making play objects for children. Children's drive for play combined with parental permission also saw much independent free play of children in the post-earthquake rural landscapes in Nepal in contrast to the tight control on children's independent mobility and free action in Japan, where play could only happen through facilitation and interventions of volunteers, NGOs, playworkers and professional groups who collectively came together to promote and provide access to play for children after the disaster like in no other crisis context in this research.



## Conclusions

The myriad forms of play that were witnessed in these many different situations of crisis across the world speak to the capacity and resilience of children to overcome adversity, survive stress and rise above disadvantage.

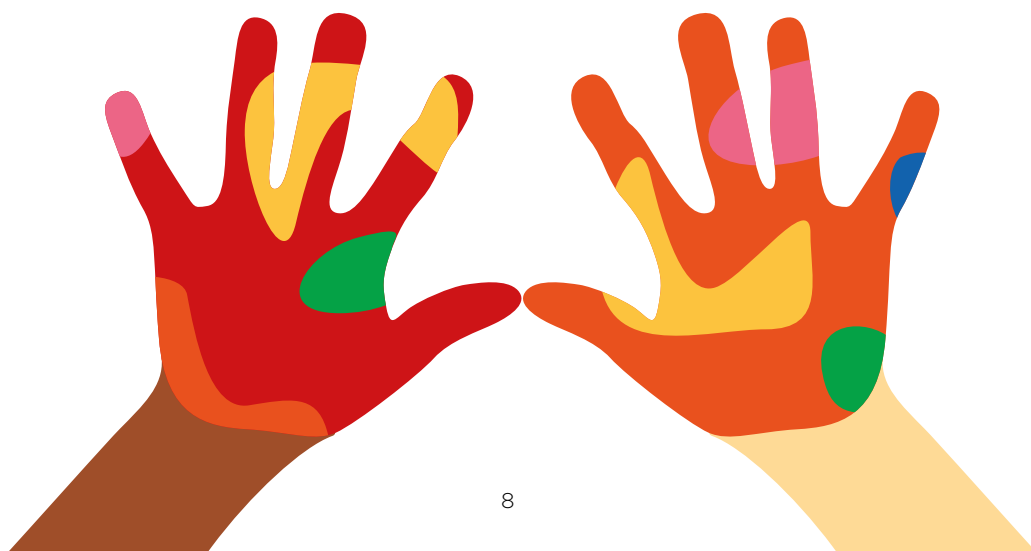
The situations where we saw the most access to play in the wider geographic area had:

- supportive adults (“Go play” is seldom heard in some cultures but not saying “don’t play” is also a big support in most contexts)
- spaces with rich environmental affordances with varying degrees of risk which children learned to manage
- fewer restrictions on children’s time

Under these conditions play emerged as a living resource and not a commodified product, a resource that allowed children to regain and retain normality under the most difficult and challenging living conditions.

It is indeed a profound challenge, reducing risks in children’s lives and increasing protective factors on one hand and providing access to free play to fulfil the right of the child to the pleasure of childhood.

The report provides recommendations for different stakeholders to both advocate for the importance of play in normalizing children’s lives in situations of crisis and to provide for it in humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters, through preparedness, risk reduction and response activities as well as through regular child-centred community development initiatives.





# Section 1: Background



# 1. Background

The word crisis is defined as ‘a difficult or dangerous situation that needs serious attention’ (Britannica, 2016). The synonyms of crisis include: catastrophe, calamity, emergency, disaster and so on. For the purpose of this research we typically used the word ‘crisis’ in the context of disasters. Globally profound disaster conditions – both natural and man-made – are on the rise precipitating situations of crisis of different scales and nature (see Table 1 for a typology of crisis). Big natural disasters can drive reform and the allocation of resources, leading to improvements in public safety (Lepore, 2016). Everyday hazards, which are ordinary, have no such power but can have as great or sometimes greater impact on children’s lives over the long run (Bartlett, 1999). It is for this reason that this research includes persistent everyday hazards as a situation of crisis.



## 1.1 Article 31 and the right to play

### **Article 31 of UNCRC**

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

Article 31 of the UNCRC recognizes the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. It outlines the commitment of duty-bearers to respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and to encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has expressed a deep concern, shared by IPA, that in situations of conflict or disaster, the child’s right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter and medicines. This is despite the fact that play is known to be crucial to children’s well-being, development, health and survival in these circumstances.

“Children have a spontaneous urge to play and participate in recreational activities and will seek out opportunities to do so in the most unfavourable environments. However, certain conditions need to be assured, in accordance with children’s evolving capacities, if they are to realize their rights under Article 31 to the optimum extent.” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013:10)

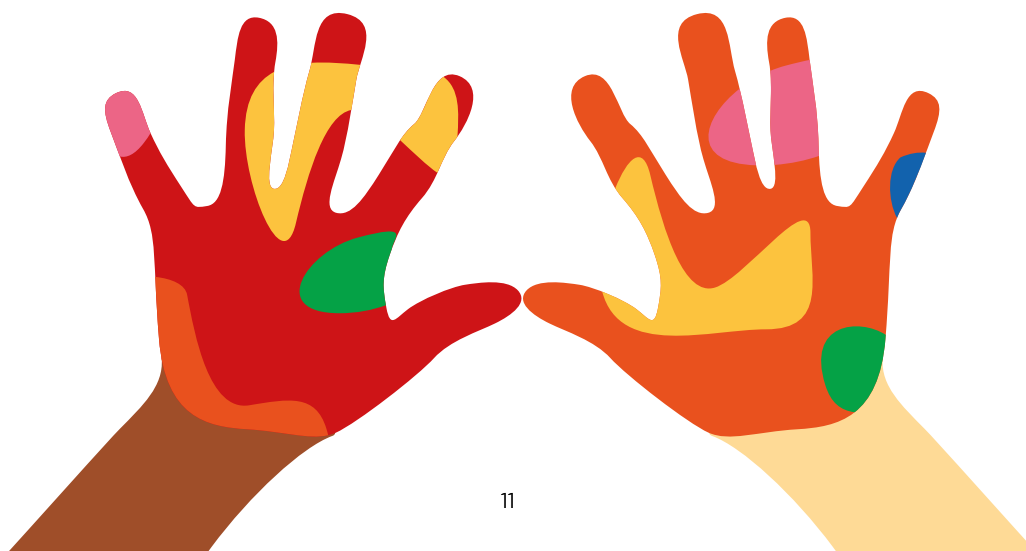
## 1.2 Typology of crisis

Situations of crisis will be understood as described within the text of the General Comment no.17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013: 17). In more detail situations of crisis include (Humanitarian Coalition, n.d.):

- Natural disasters, which can be geophysical (e.g. earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions), hydrological (e.g. floods, avalanches), climatological (e.g. droughts, sea level rise), meteorological (e.g. storms, cyclones), or biological (e.g. epidemics, plagues).
- Man-made emergencies, such as armed conflicts, plane and train crashes, fires and industrial accidents.
- Complex emergencies, which often have a combination of natural and man-made elements, and different causes of vulnerability and a combination of factors leading to a humanitarian crisis. Examples include food insecurity, armed conflicts, and displaced populations.

**Table 1: Typology of crisis Situations and risk spectrum**

Adapted from: Bull-Kamanga, L. et al. (2003).			
Nature of event	Large-scale natural and humanitarian disasters (e.g. tsunamis, earthquakes, typhoons, civil wars, genocide, international conflicts, drought)	Small disasters (e.g. seasonal flooding, storms, house fires, localized landslides, wildfire, epidemics)	Everyday hazards (e.g. unsafe, hazardous living environments; preventable disease, traffic)
Frequency	Typically, infrequent though common to some parts of the world	Frequent (seasonal)	Everyday
Scale	Large or potential to be large and life threatening	Medium	Medium in inadequate living environments
Impact on children	Can be catastrophic, violating basic rights of the child	Significant but under-estimated contribution to children's ill-health, injuries, loss of well-being.	Significant and mostly ignored contributor to creating unfavourable living environments for children.
Risks	Intensive risks	Extensive risks	Extensive risks in some places and times



Between 2005 and 2014, natural disasters affected an annual average of 168.5 million people (Lovell & Masson, 2015). The extent of the impact of these natural hazards is typically directly proportional to people's vulnerability to hazards and people's capacity to cope (Wisner et al., 2014). For example, disaster literature shows that populations most vulnerable to disaster risks are defined on the basis of their gender, age, income, disability, ethnicity, culture, and religion among others (see Box: Vulnerability of women, children and excluded groups), and along these lines are often geographically, socially, economically, culturally and politically marginalized (Lovell & Masson, 2014). In 2011, the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction called children and young people the largest group affected by disasters (UNISDR, 2011).

The intensive risks of large-scale natural disasters, which typically are hard to predict, are well documented. Man-made or human-induced disasters are growing at an alarming rate. For example, UNICEF estimates that some 8.4 million children – more than 80 percent of Syria's child population – are now affected by the conflict, either inside the country or as refugees in neighbouring countries (Nolan, 2016). Further, climate change is now recognized as a major contributor to disaster risk. In the decade from 2006, it was estimated that up to 175 million children were likely to be affected every year by the kinds of natural disasters brought about by climate change (Save the Children, 2007).

World Humanitarian Data and Trends (UNOCHA, 2014) shows that 97 million people were affected by natural disasters in 2013 alone, the top five affected countries being China (27.5 million), Philippines (25.7 million), India (16.7 million), Vietnam (4.1 million) and Thailand (3.5 million). In the same year, 51.2 million people were affected by conflict – internally displaced people: 33.5 million; refugees: 16.7 million; and asylum seekers: 1.2 million. On the other hand, the Slum Almanac 2015-16 published by UN Habitat records one in eight people living in slums or over a billion people around the world living in slum-like and often hazardous conditions in cities. The crisis of growing up in poverty in adequate living environments not only threatens the individual child but entrenches and even exacerbates inequality in society (Ortiz et al., 2012).

### **Vulnerability of women, children and excluded groups.** (source: Kim et al., 2015).

It was estimated that between 60 and 70 per cent of deaths from the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 were among women and children. In the case of the 2010 floods in Pakistan, women and children were overlooked in the distribution of relief or had no access to places where relief was being distributed. Women and girls were also more vulnerable to storms in the Philippines. Death rates in the year after the typhoon exposure were significantly higher among female infants compared to their male counterparts (Anttila, Huges and Hsiang, 2013). In Aceh, Indonesia, 53.7 per cent of the victims of the Indian Ocean Tsunami were either children below 10 years or elderly above 70 years, and nearly two thirds of the dead or missing people were women or girls (Rofi et al. 2006). Sri Lanka also reported high mortality of children (31.8 per cent for 0-5 years, 23.7 per cent for 5-9 years) and of people above 50 years (15.3 per cent).

Though assessments of disaster impacts are often undermined by the lack of a measurable definition of who is affected and a sound methodology of measurement (Guha-Sapir & Hoyois, 2015), two things can be said about disaster impacts with some confidence:

- Most people impacted by disasters in the last decade live in Asia.
- Children are a disproportionately vulnerable group in the context of disasters.



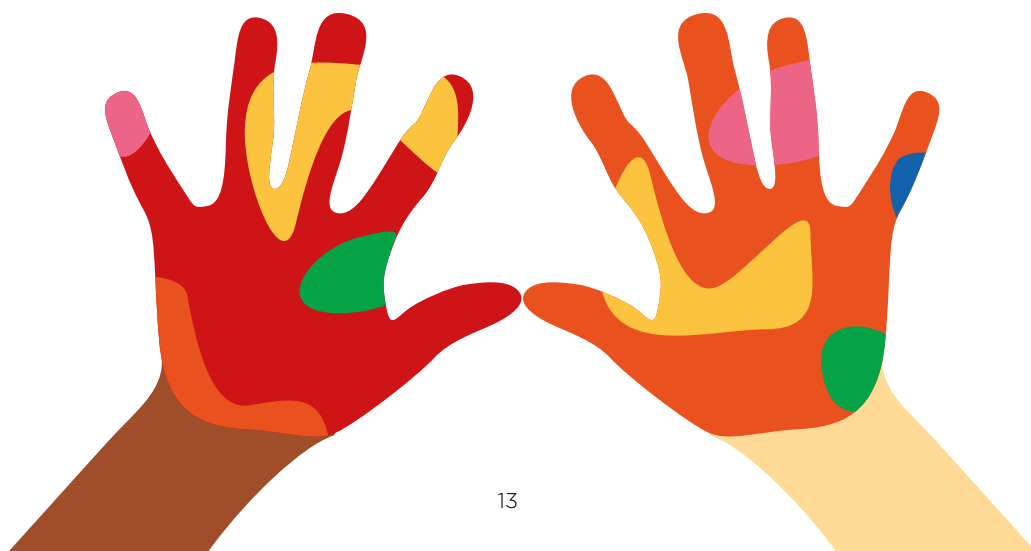
## 1.3 Impact on children

Experiencing difficult or disturbing events can significantly impact the social and emotional wellbeing of a child. Exposure to violence or disaster, the loss of a sense of place and familiar home and all the connected services and social networks, and deterioration in living conditions can all have immediate as well as long-term consequences for the balance, development and fulfilment of children, families and communities (ARC Resource Pack, 2009).

The way in which children respond to situations of crisis is often acknowledged as depending on their own personality and resilience, support from family, school and community, the type of crisis and the duration of the crisis (Benard, 1991, 2004; Coffman, 1998; Sugar, 1989). These situations can have an impact on children's lives both acutely and chronically over time and may result in children experiencing post-traumatic stress, as well as the consequences of any physical violence and injury that results from any of these crises. In some situations, children are vulnerable to being used as child labour and other forms of mental and physical abuse. In some situations, children also choose to work to support their families and for the recovery of livelihoods. Furthermore, in some contexts children are already helping with chores and work, but the types of work or specific roles of children may change in a crisis situation. In most humanitarian crises children comprise half or more of the population affected by the situation and after the Haiti earthquake, which amplified the existing poverty, many children

were forced into dangerous labour or sexual exploitation in order to survive (Wessells and Kostelny, 2013). A recent example is the exponential rise in sexual violence against girls during and in the aftermath of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone (Save the Children, 2015). Girls are also vulnerable to attack and rape in locations such as refugee camps when they walk to and wait for toilets. Altogether this results in lost childhoods and lasting physical and mental health problems for many years. This can also occur when children are displaced within their own country.

Daily routines build the framework for children's lives and these become disrupted in crisis situations. Such disruptions result in a loss of normality and are accompanied by fears and uncertainty of the present and future. One of the most profound fears, common to all these situations, is that of separation from and loss of parents and siblings. Children experience relocation, displacement and changes in environmental, physical and emotional states. Loss is not just of family but of places. Loss of familiar spaces and places is especially important to older children and adolescents. Loss of play spaces and safe spaces is often accompanied by new dangers, such as landmines or unsafe buildings in familiar places, with the implication that outdoor play becomes hazardous. Outdoor play can be disrupted by the loss of specific open spaces sometimes associated with educational buildings (Woolley & Kinoshita, 2014). Altogether this results in severe disruption to normal life.



## 1.4 Interventions for children in situations of crisis

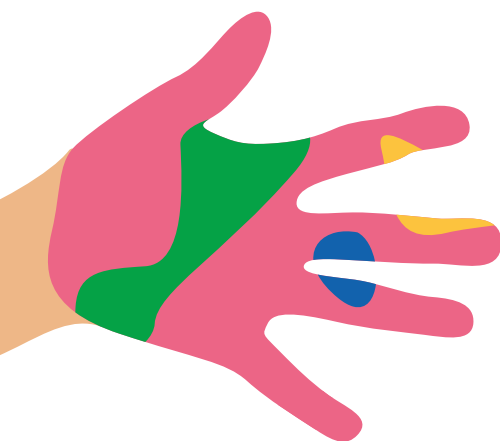
Literature on psychosocial programming for children in crisis acknowledges that it is critical to return the child to familiar activities: play, school, participation in household chores. Playing in safe settings is also seen as a way to build resilience and to enhance protective factors in children's lives (Duncan & Arnston, 2004).

Recent years have seen a dramatic growth in programmes designed to provide psychological and community-based support to children and families recovering from distressing events. This is a departure from the prevalent model in the 1980s and 1990s of applying western, individualized approaches of counselling and therapy to cultures in which they do not readily apply. The qualitative results from a UNICEF-supported participatory evaluation study of sports, play and structured recreation activities organized in camps for internally displaced people in northern and eastern Uganda indicate overall benefits and a positive impact on children's wellbeing, and address the basic psychological needs of competence and relatedness (ARC Resource Pack, 2009).

**Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs):** Academic evidence reveals that support to children's access to play in crisis situations is typically embedded in interventions such as Child Friendly Spaces and takes the form of child centred activities where play is given a wide definition including art, story-telling and writing, dance and drama.

The Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs) provide an umbrella setting within which psychosocial support can take place through learning and recreational activities. These activities are typically led by individuals such as teachers who have received training in psychosocial counselling. Structured activities supported by equipment and trained facilitators are provided in a range of emergency settings including recreational and cultural forms. Responses of children in the West Bank and Gaza showed an improvement in emotional and behavioural wellbeing, though not hopefulness, after such activities (Loughry et al., 2006).

Child Friendly Spaces are increasingly acknowledged as being important in crisis situations for three main reasons. First, CFSs are seen to serve as a protective mechanism, protecting children from abuse, exploitation or violence. Second, CFSs are considered a means to provide psychosocial support to children, strengthening their emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing, and/or skills and knowledge (Ager et al., 2011). Third, CFSs are seen as a key vehicle for mobilizing communities around the protection and wellbeing of children, and strengthening community protection mechanisms (Global Protection Cluster et al., 2011).





CFSs provide an umbrella of relative safety within which children can be supported to deal with the situation and experience a degree of normality. CFSs are also seen as advantageous for various reasons. These include the potential for rapid deployment; relatively low costs; scalability and adaptability of activities to diverse contexts (UNICEF, 2009). Originally CFSs were intended for children aged 7-13, but the model has proved to have the potential to accommodate children of all ages (Global Protection Cluster et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2009). Underlying all this, CFSs provide opportunities for routines and relationships with other children who have shared experiences. Various agencies have provided guidance about Child Friendly Spaces and psychosocial support; one of the most comprehensive of these is the “Child Friendly Spaces in Emergencies” handbook for Save the Children Staff. This outlines stages of developing a CFS, staffing it, types of activities that can be provided, monitoring and evaluation of the CFSs, and transition and exit from the CFS (Save the Children, 2008).

**Play and play therapy:** Play is an important aspect of normality in a child’s life. Playing helps children develop an intimate relationship with their immediate environment and play offers the possibility of injecting “surprise into the mundane practicalities of everyday experiences” (Lester, 2010, p.2) or conjuring “ordinary magic”, a phrase coined by Masten (2001) to describe the properties of resilience and adopted by Lester and Russell (2008) to conceptualize the relationship between playing and the key adaptive systems associated with resilience.

Specific expressions of play in crisis contexts include children using play to work out their understanding of an experience, including violence to which they have been exposed (Levin, 2003). Such play has been identified as Post-Traumatic Play (PTP), which has been described as play with a driven, serious and morbid quality (Gil, 1998; Nadar and Pynoos, 1991; Terr, 1983; Varkas, 1998). Such play is characterized by repetitive unresolved themes, increased aggressiveness and/or withdrawal, fantasies linked with rescue or revenge, reduced symbolization and concrete thinking (Cohen et al., 2010).



These play patterns are often taken into consideration while diagnosing children with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In play therapy, play becomes a major modality for learning from children themselves. The language the children use about their experiences helps therapists identify and offer treatment to those exposed to traumatic events, even if they do not meet the criteria of PTSD (Cohen, 2006). Play has also been used as a framework for unstructured experiential activities where local volunteers and social workers have sought to support children's resilience in refugee camps in the ongoing conflict in Palestine (Veronese et al., 2012).

The interventions revealed from the literature include play as part of a bigger picture. Yet the literature is limited in how much it discusses children's own, freely chosen play as defined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Most of the play discussed in the literature is about lost play or specific play interventions. This is often in the form of some type of play therapy even if it is not articulated as such. Play activities, in their broadest sense, are also mentioned in Child Friendly Spaces. From the literature, it is unclear how much accountability there is for any organization to promote the right to play for children in different crisis situations.





# Section 2: Research design



# 2. Research design

## 2.1 Rationale

The literature on access to play in situations of crisis has significant gaps in understanding the play of children in crisis situations and how play needs are being met. The academic, as well as development literature documents play (in a broad sense) in crisis situations as embedded in intervention programming. To some extent journalists' evidence complements this to show that children do create space and time for play, presumably play that is freely chosen.

Although children consistently remark about playing, play spaces, and their need for play, evidence of how agencies (NGOs, government agencies, UN agencies etc.) respond to those needs is difficult to find. Many NGOs seem to support play activities in practice but do not record it as 'research' or 'evidence'. This could be because their priorities are to deal with play only as part of a bigger picture of humanitarian aid and support.

Most importantly, there is no clear information about what really works. Of course, there are several challenges to such research including:

- permission and access to the situations of crisis for research with children
- safety concerns while doing research
- permission from potential participants
- safety of research participants
- threat to anonymity and confidentiality of participants when research findings are potentially identifying and socially and politically damaging.

## 2.2 Research objectives

In order to address the research gaps and provide meaningful advice to child-centred NGOs and other agencies involved in humanitarian and disaster risk reduction work, IPA's Access to Play in Crisis research has the following key objectives:

- To understand the play needs and rights of children in situations of crisis from children's and adult perspectives
- To explore current policies and practices that support play in different crisis contexts and what restricts play
- To understand to what extent agencies actively involve children so that they can inform the development of programmes intended to promote play
- To understand how children themselves create opportunities for play in situations of crisis and how that intersects with the discourses of vulnerability and protection on one hand and resilience on the other
- To understand the dynamics between free play by children undertaken for its own sake and organizational mandates where play is often a means to an end within programmatic activities (e.g. an icebreaking activity before a workshop or a play therapy session).



## 2.3 Research questions:

1. How does crisis affect children's right to play in everyday life?
2. How do children cope, and does coping help build resilience?
3. What are the roles of adults and community development organizations in promoting the right to play in situations of crisis?
4. What importance do children's organizations, working on humanitarian and disaster risk reduction, place on children's play rights in the context of their work/programmes?
5. What are the lessons for promoting the right to play in situations of crisis?

## 2.4 Methodology

**Selecting research partners:** IPA engaged with organizations or individuals with capacity and expertise to undertake research projects in situations of crisis in Turkey, Lebanon, India, Nepal, Thailand and Japan. The expert committee guiding this research and existing IPA networks helped to identify research partners who were selected through a submissions process. The researchers participated in an induction workshop in New Delhi in November 2016 after they piloted the tools developed for this research and before undertaking fieldwork. The author, who is also the project officer for the APC research and training projects, was in regular contact with researchers to closely monitor progress, offer any support, clarify doubts and suggest alternative strategies during fieldwork and the field report writing phase.

**Selecting the research context:** The author developed the framework for typology of different situations of crisis (see Table 1) for facilitating the first IPA workshop on Access to Play in Crisis in Istanbul held in May 2014. This framework was used by the research teams to identify different situations of crisis in the selected countries.

**Stakeholders from whom data was collected:** Children, parents, other caregivers, service providers, community based organizations, NGOs and children's organizations engaged in Humanitarian, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) work.

**Ethical protocols followed:** Research with children needs to be anchored in strong ethical protocols that range from maintaining confidentiality on sensitive issues to ensuring that children are safe and not exposed to different forms of abuse. Even if children wanted to have their names associated with their evidence, the researcher anonymized the data for protecting the identity of children. Due consideration was made for involving different groups of children or individual children, with a consideration of age, gender, disability and other aspects of identity and inclusion.

Considering the sensitivity of issues relating to children's experience of crisis situations it was important to ensure that each local research team included a child protection focal person experienced in listening to and providing psychosocial support to children. The child protection focal person was also aware of referral services in the area in case of disclosure of abuse or other significant concerns.

The data that was generated by any of the methods, especially those that were visual and took time for the children to create, were clearly owned by the children. Researchers made sure to record data and leave the original outputs with the children (as long as this did not put the children at any risk).

### **Developing trust and relationships:**

The researchers were encouraged to work in strong collaboration with child-centred and child-led organizations who have established trustful relationships with children in the selected communities and are able to create a safe enjoyable environment in which children felt free to speak and share their views.

## 2.4.1 Research tools

This empirical research used mostly qualitative methods for observing and understanding children's play in crisis situations by directly working with children and other community members. To supplement the most important method of observing children at play in habitual places, six child-friendly tools were adapted from existing toolkits that were recommended by the expert panel of this research; tools that had been tried and tested for engaging children in research in situations of crisis elsewhere (University of Brighton 2014, and Save the Children Norway 2008). To understand organizational work with children, perceptions of parents, adults in the community, organization staff and government stakeholders, individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. The child-friendly tools were as follows (for more details see the research tools on the IPA website):

1. **The Body Map:** A participatory tool which helps to record diverse experiences of children. The body image (and body parts) is used as a focus to explore and record participant's views regarding the different ways in which living in a situation of crisis has affected their lives.
2. **Risk Mapping:** A participatory tool that enables children and young people to explore the risks they face in their local communities; identify factors in their local communities, in a situation of crisis, that challenge play, while also identifying the risks they most want to reduce.
3. **Group Child-led Tours:** The researcher asks to be shown around and to hear about play places or place-related play events that are familiar to children based on their own experiences. This method enables in situ assessments of play spaces in their local environment or an indoor institutional setting by children and adolescents.
4. **Child-led Demonstrations of Play Experiences in a Simulated Environment:** This tool is useful when it may not be possible to have children to lead the researcher through the environment because they are too heavily used by others at all times, or because the children would feel uncomfortable showing and speaking while others are watching. This tool may be especially useful for describing play experiences in an unsafe place that children frequent (with or without permission) and engage in different forms of play.

5. **Conversational Interviews with Children using a Prop:** This method is particularly useful if the researcher wants to interview children including younger ones on play experiences with a view to understanding different forms of coping. The method enables children to engage in conversations with adults in a play-based way.
6. **The Flower Map:** A simple visual tool to explore which people provide support to children and young people's play.

The methods that worked the best for capturing and understanding the experience of play were individual and group child-led walks in the local environment, informal conversations and systematic observations of children at play. After the Delhi research workshop, a detailed observation checklist was developed and shared with the researchers to enable systematic observations of children's play behaviours and play episodes in different settings. The checklist was informed by the definition of play in the General Comment 17, the idea of play types (Hughes, 2001), a modified affordance taxonomy of children's environments (Chatterjee, 2006; Kytta, 2002). It also had a framework for documenting the barriers to play in each site and adult intervention styles in children's play.



## 2.4.2 Sample size

Sampling strategy for this research was primarily convenience sampling – based on access and availability of children and informed consent from parents and children. The child-friendly tools were administered to children in three age categories in each site (if there were multiple research sites in a country, then each site had to follow this sampling strategy).

- a. Girls in the age group 11 to 14 years
- b. Girls in the age group 15 to 18 years
- c. Boys in the age group 11 to 14 years
- d. Boys in the age group 15 to 18 years
- e. Mixed group of boys and girls in the age group 6 to 10 years

Each age category formed a separate respondent group with a minimum of 7 to a maximum of 9 children in each group. In this manner, the facilitators were asked to try and reach out to at least 35 children in each crisis situation. In reality, all the research partners managed to reach at least 40 children in each site. In addition, several key informant interviews were done in each context with parents, community leaders, programme staff of community-based organizations working with children, youth and child-led organizations and local government officials wherever possible.

## 2.5 Research context

The APC research was conducted in six different countries spread across Asia and the Middle East and engaged with a diverse range of situations of crisis. Using the categorization presented in Table 1 and refining it further based on our chosen contexts, the research projects are introduced on the next page.



**Table 2: Research sites in six countries**

Crisis	Natural disaster		Humanitarian crisis		Everyday crisis	
APC research context	Japan	Nepal	Turkey	Lebanon	India	Thailand
	Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, with a magnitude 9.0, followed by a tsunami that triggered a crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant. This was a unique triple disaster never experienced anywhere else in the world.	The massive Gorkha Earthquake on April 25, 2015 in Nepal with a magnitude 7.8 followed by landslides in the Himalayas and aftershocks for days.	Turkey houses the largest Roma population (2.7 million) in a European country. Yet the Roma live in poverty and exclusion over many generations with limited or no access to education, employment, health services or proper housing. Recent policies are further discriminating against the Roma.	Protracted crisis of Syrian refugees seeking refuge in Lebanon since 2011. More than 2 million Syrian refugees are living in 5000+ Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) spread across Lebanon.	Slums are the de facto housing for the poor in Indian cities; earlier migrants live in legally recognized settlements whereas the later migrants live in illegal squatter settlements in hazardous locations without any legal access to basic services or social security.	Thailand has become a destination country for economic migration from neighbouring countries, particularly from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. There are currently an estimated 3.25 million legal and illegal migrants living here.
Location of research sites	Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture.	Bhumlutar village in Kavre district and Kunchowk village in Sindupalchowk district.	Three Roma majority neighborhoods of Sulukule, Tarlabasi and Kustepe in Istanbul.	ITSs in Bekaa, Beirut, and North	Nimtala Ghat squatter settlement along a railway track in Kolkata.	Two urban sites near Bangkok and one rural site near Burma border housing Burmese and Cambodian migrants.
Impact of crisis	Generated 26.7 million tons of debris and claimed 19,533 lives. The chosen city, Ishinomaki city in Miyagi Prefecture, was severely affected: 3541 people died and 427 people are still missing. The earthquake triggered a tsunami that devastated the coastal areas. The sea wall to the Fukushima nuclear power plant failed and many people were evacuated from the area.	Both the selected districts were severely impacted with massive loss of life (3438 in Sindupalchowk and 318 in Kavre) and property (113818 houses fully damaged in both districts). In Kavre, 548 government schools were damaged and 557 in Sindupalchowk. As Nepal is a small and poor country, the earthquake undid many developmental gains made over the years.	Recent government policies are targeting centuries old Roma neighbourhoods for 'urban regeneration'. People are expropriated, alienated, victimized and displaced for gentrification. Already a marginalized and disenfranchised minority group, Roma people who are being displaced by the urban regeneration are uncertain and fearful about the future. neighbourhoods for 'urban regeneration'. People are expropriated, alienated, victimized and displaced for gentrification. Already a marginalized and disenfranchised minority group, Roma people who are being displaced by the urban regeneration are uncertain and fearful about the future.	Syrian refugees today represent almost a quarter of Lebanon's population. This is putting a great strain on Lebanon's economy and society. The increasing poverty, food shortage and general insecurity have escalated tensions between Syrian refugees and local Lebanese citizens.	Every day is a crisis when living in poverty in an extremely hazardous living environment as an illegal resident. Poverty is passed on to successive generations as a direct consequence of the lack of opportunities for education, skills and vocational training ensuring that the population engages in the lowest paid unskilled and semi-skilled work and are kept in poverty.	Even though Thai law protects migrant workers, foreign migrant workers are in fact not protected or treated equally. There is widespread ethnic/race discrimination and marginalisation against migrant workers in Thailand who work for longer hours and live in unhealthy and hazardous environments, often oppressed, threatened or reported to the police. Many migrant children born in Thailand are stateless as their births are not registered.

# Section 3:

## Key findings





# 3. Key findings

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## 3.1 Natural disasters

The APC research engaged with two major natural disasters, the Great East Japan earthquake and the triple disaster precipitated by it, and the Gorkha earthquake in Nepal. Japan is a high income and predominantly urban country whereas Nepal is a low-income and predominantly rural country. Even though Japan is three times the size of Nepal, almost 100 million more people live in Nepal than Japan. It is widely believed that had the Gorkha earthquake happened near the densely populated capital city, Kathmandu, the death toll and casualties would have been in millions.

### 3.1.1 No/limited access to play after the tsunami in Japan

Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world and also one of the best prepared. Immediately after the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the tsunami on the coast of the Tohoku area, people were evacuated to schools and large halls and lived in overcrowded conditions for about six months while temporary housing was being constructed by the government.

After the evacuation stage, different types of temporary houses were made available but no play spaces. Irrespective of where children were staying, evacuation centres, at a relative's house, or public temporary housing, or even when children returned to their original house directly from the evacuation shelter, children had no adequate space or opportunity to play. In the atmosphere of great sadness, loss and despair, many children refrained from playing and they were told not to play by adults in many of the temporary living spaces. The disaster destroyed spaces where children used to play. Parks and schoolyards became dominated by construction work for temporary houses and left-over spaces around them were covered in tarmac and used for parking cars. Friends got separated while moving to temporary and other housing options in different locations.

### 3.1.2 Access to play in risky landscapes for young children and boys in Nepal

Unlike in Japan, people were not evacuated and taken to safer places in Nepal after the earthquake. People ran outside and eventually constructed temporary shelters for themselves in the open spaces of the village. Two years after the earthquake, the recovery efforts have been stalled by political instability and money mismanagement resulting in many still staying in their makeshift shelters outdoors while some have moved back to their damaged houses in the two districts under the APC research. However younger children (6-10 years) seemed to enjoy this new communal living outdoors with neighbours. Parents actively encouraged younger children to play with their friends but asked them to stay away from unsafe places such as damaged buildings and steep slopes while they, along with their older children, rebuilt their homes or attended to livelihoods. Homes are still being rebuilt by people using the skills they have along with new skills acquired from trainings provided by different NGOs after the earthquake. They used materials purchased from the market and also re-used the materials they managed to salvage while demolishing their homes. Older adolescent boys were actively involved in rebuilding and coordinating relief materials for their families.



Immediately after the earthquake, due to the aftershocks that continued for days, children were too scared to go out and play. But as people started making makeshift shelters, children who could not be involved had to get out of the way. The adolescents in Nepal said that they rarely played after the earthquake; the destruction, loss of their relatives and neighbours and disruption of their normal lifestyle traumatized them. Adolescent girls anyway had limited access to play even in normal times in their villages, school being the only exception. Moreover, the fear of thefts and trafficking engulfed families and aid workers; the focus of the development and disaster risk reduction community was on survival and protection of children rather than promoting the right to play.

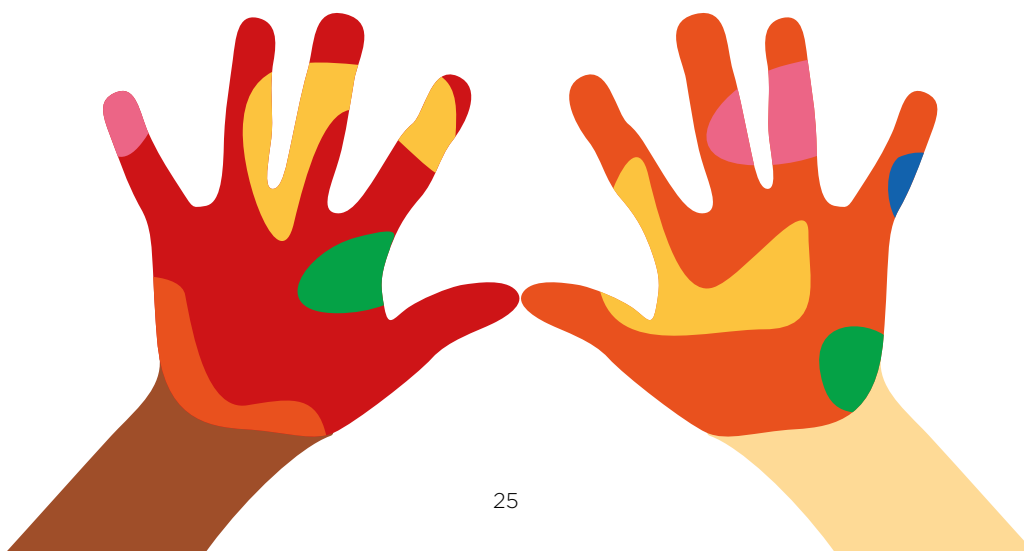
Shelters were located in the safe open spaces in villages including in the playgrounds and school premises leaving children little choice but to play on the roads, which were not safe due to frequent movement of people and materials in the aftermath of the disaster. In Sindupalchowk, there were still some safe open spaces left after the shelters were put up, but in Kavre, which has a steep terrain and forested areas, there were no safe spaces for playing after the earthquake. When the schools reopened after a month, they became the primary places where children of all ages could play safely and engage in sports and other recreational activities. Many schools had child clubs that regularly organized these activities for children. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake the child clubs were not functional and they only resumed activities after the schools reopened.

## 3.2 Humanitarian crisis

A humanitarian crisis (or 'humanitarian disaster') is defined as a singular event or a series of events that are threatening in terms of health, safety or wellbeing of a community or large group of people. The situations of humanitarian crisis represented in the APC research include the deeply entrenched structural discrimination against the Roma community in Turkey that prevent political commitments for the inclusion of the Roma in mainstream Turkish society, and the crisis of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, which despite being one of the smallest and poorest countries in the region, is today the only one that has maintained an open border for refugees.

### 3.2.1 Unsafe neighbourhoods and lack of free play in Turkey

The three Roma neighborhoods (Sulukule, Tarlabasi and Kustepe) under this study in Istanbul were all poor, lacked open spaces for outdoor play and had unsafe public places which together with lack of parental permissions restricted free play of children outdoors. Parents told stories about kidnapping, burglary, and street fights to scare children from venturing out too much. Crime was not uncommon; streetfights, prostitution and drugs were part of the urban reality. Consequently, children did not have a chance to play freely in the community. The only places which were considered safe were the children's centres run by different organizations and university volunteers. These centres were often the only places where the Roma children got an education as many of them did not attend schools regularly because of discrimination, which coupled with poverty forced many children to drop out of school.



In Sulukule, adolescents had grown up in the shadow of evictions for the past 10 years to make way for a much publicized and debated redevelopment project. The untold fears included fear of loss of homes, displacement, severing of social ties and friendships, isolation and readjustment in new surroundings which were most likely to be slums in other parts of Istanbul; fear of bullying and marginalization in new schools on account of their low SES status and racial identity; fear of racial and ethnic discrimination in the new neighbourhoods among others. Instead the adolescents expressed their feelings through art (graffiti) and music (rap). They liked going to the Byzantine ruins on the edge of Sulukule and climbing the walls that collapsed during the 1999 earthquake. They loved to look at the view from there. Even though that place was considered a crime hotspot, for the teenagers it was a refuge and a place to be connected to nature.

Roma children had ample free time but very few places to go, they attended the after-school centres catering for children up to 14 years, as well as the weekend programmes at the centres. Even though the centres were one of the most important socialization places for Roma children, play at the centres was adult-initiated and adult-managed (by volunteers) with limited opportunities for free play, particularly in outdoor spaces. Some activities were more flexible and creative, such as the art projects, while others are more oriented towards developing academic skills.



### 3.2.2 Landscapes of fear and barriers to play in Lebanon

The APC research in Lebanon worked with vulnerable Lebanese children and Syrian refugees' children who either lived in informal tented settlements, or in collective shelters for Syrians and Lebanese. Many of the participating children were out of school, some were child labourers while others attended formal or non-formal education programmes. They all came to the BEYOND Association's protection centres in Bekaa, Beirut, and the North. Most of the children expressed their thoughts about the crisis with a preoccupation with the scenes of war either witnessed directly or through televisions, giving specific details about bombs, destructions, displacement, being lost and away from home, and losing friends, relatives and parents.

There were several barriers to children's play ranging from garbage in the neighborhoods, to fear of fights with weapons, strangers who made them feel unsafe, heavy vehicular movement that threatened children's independent mobility, hazards of pests and animals in open fields, hazards of risky sites next to rivers and sea and social constraints on girls' play outdoors.

### 3.3 Everyday crisis

The contexts of everyday crisis in India and Thailand in this research both dealt with migrant labourers who had moved from rural to urban areas, within and across borders, in search of a better life for themselves and their children. In both cases the migrants worked in unequally remunerated or underpaid jobs, tolerating many abuses and deprivations, settling in slums as illegal residents, where they were exposed to pollution, crime and environmental threats, with limited access to basic services such as clean water and sanitation, health and education.

### 3.3.1 More access to play in Burmese communities in Thailand

In Thailand, 80% of all migrants are Burmese who have been fleeing their homeland since 1984, when Burma's Ne Win Government clashed with ethnic minority forces. Later, following the policy of 'constructive engagement' with Burma which began under Thailand's Chatichai Choonhavan government (1988-91), the border with Burma became porous for movement of capital, goods, and labour (Arnold, 2007, 2005). Consequently, there was a greater sense of community among the Burmese migrants who were able to keep alive their cultural, traditional and religious practices, to have connections with other Burmese migrant groups in other areas and remain connected to their home country.

This had a positive impact on the right to play of children as was most notably seen in the case of the rural community in Mae Sot district which has shared borders with Myanmar and a permanent crossing point. Being a rural community with relatively safe surroundings, children here were able to play with nature more than migrant children in the city. Though the majority of the children in this migrant community attended two NGO-run non-formal schools for migrant children, they did not attend regularly as they undertook paid work either on farms or as cattle caretakers. The local environment also posed risks to children: the nearby cattle market was active every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with cattle fighting sessions and gambling. Children, whose parents worked far away from home, were left alone and had no permission to go far from their community because they could be caught by the police (as many workers were illegal) or they could enter unsafe gambling zones. In some cases, alcohol and drug use in families put children at high risk of abuse when they were home alone.

The urban Burmese community lived around the Saphan Pla fish dock and fish marketing area, but separately and away from the general Thai community. The community inhabits pockets of flood prone land on the way to fish piers, surrounded by a high-risk landscape dotted with abandoned buildings and dark swampy mangrove areas. Work hours of the community, who are employed by the fishing industry, are 8 pm to 4 am,

leaving children unsupervised and vulnerable at night. Various coping mechanisms have evolved including women taking turns to coordinate off days for watching over the children at night. In Saphan Pla most children's play involved exploring the many safe as well as unsafe places in their surroundings. This community, with well-established networks (including with the development community), has seen the most investment in creating safe play spaces for younger children through participatory processes initiated by the NGO Foundation for Child Development.

In contrast to the two Burmese migrant communities in this study, the Cambodian migrant community, in an urban setting, actively prevented children from playing outdoors. The Cambodian migrants, many of whom are illegal, live in a busy port area where sand trading takes place, bringing in much heavy vehicular traffic and unchecked workers. The migrants work in factories, fresh markets and as labourers in fishing boats and construction sites. Working hours are usually long, from 5 am to 4 pm, but as most workers are informal labour, some work overtime until 8 pm for very low wages. Parents feared for their children while away at work because of the physical hazards and the social dangers in their community. They prohibited their children from playing far away from home. Some of the children had no permission to leave the house at all and were locked up at home while parents were away at work. They were given cell phones as a communication lifeline and cheap toys to play with inside the cramped houses. Child abduction and human trafficking had taken place in the community and fear of losing their children haunts parents and community members.

### 3.3.2 High risk living environment and risky play of children in Kolkata

The site of the APC research in India is a squatter settlement where people live without any security of tenure and in abject poverty in an extremely hazardous environment. The squatter huts are located on either side of a railway track for the Circular Railway that encircles Kolkata. To the east of the squatter settlement is the river Hooghly, a tributary of the river Ganges before entering the Bay of Bengal. This low-lying settlement is located in Ward No. 20 of Kolkata and is popularly known as Nimtala Ghat after the famous crematorium of the same name nearby, where 70-80 dead bodies are cremated daily. The squatter settlers are illegal despite having migrated to Kolkata 3-4 generations back. Due to their perceived lower caste (Doms\*) they are discriminated against in legal settlements and thus prefer to stay as illegal squatters in a hazardous environment but close to readily available informal work, which is mainly linked to the various industries servicing the crematorium and open pyre funerals. Growing up barely three feet away from a busy rail track, and despite inadequate signalling for approaching trains and no information about the direction of the incoming train, children and families considered the train track a lesser hazard than the river. The river is mighty and unpredictable particularly during a tidal bore when the sudden surge increases the water level with strong currents. Two children died in the river during the rainy season last year.

Being born into a situation of extreme economic, social, and physical environmental deprivation, children face increased risks of school drop out, and undertaking paid and unpaid work from a young age. National laws and policies also play a role in deepening the vulnerability of poor children in India: the Right to Education Act 2009 mandates free and compulsory education only up to age 14 and the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 actually allows children to be engaged in most forms of work after 14 years. As a direct consequence, children drop out of school at 14 and start working like their parents, mostly in caste-based jobs. Even before 14 years, children help their families in their work to cope with poverty, and this is now allowed in law if shown as working in family enterprise or business.

Children were often subjected to violence at home and the community, and due to the lack of support to address the psychological stress of growing up in a hazardous physical environment with a high degree of social apathy and discrimination, children often resorted to risk taking behaviour such as substance abuse and aggression towards other children. Despite these adverse circumstances, the children appeared happy and had very few complaints except that they were not allowed to play in a playground in a nearby neighbourhood. However, they had ample opportunities to play in the local environment. The children accepted their situation as normal despite high physical and social risks, and in spite of lack of access to formal play spaces were extremely creative in devising games using available resources and environmental affordances.

### 3.4 Playing and coping and building resilience

Across the situations of crisis in the six countries, children played. The nature of play was to a large extent shaped by: the age, gender and ability of the child; the nature of the space where they had access to play; the cultural and social context; the time available for play and the level of parental permission for playing in certain places and at certain times. The freest play was witnessed in children under 14 years in the Burmese migrant communities in Thailand, amongst the squatters beside the railway track in Kolkata and the earthquake-hit villages of Kunchowk and Bhumlutar in Nepal.



### 3.4.1 Age, gender and ability

The youngest children and girls in some cultures (India, Thailand and Nepal) played close to home even when the play space had high risks such as the railway track that pierced through the squatter settlement in Kolkata. From age eight onwards boys sought out spaces away from parents' or known gazes to engage in deep and risky play. In many cultures, such as in Lebanon, Nepal and India, adolescent girls had no time or permission to play and girls themselves refrained from playing, believing that they are too old to play.

However, they did play imaginatively while working, using the materials at hand (such as cooking utensils or clothes for washing) or they played on their mobile phones. There had not been much reporting on the access to play of disabled children across the situations of crisis in this research except in Nepal where it was reported that disabled children were tied up in safe open spaces to keep them from harm while rebuilding activities went on around them.

In Kolkata, the most common play space of girls and young children was the railway track along which they live. In fact, parents started acclimatizing their children to the harsh environment from a young age; infants were laid down with their heads on the track to feel the vibration of train movements so that they knew in their blood when to get out of harm's way. Usually children till five years played on the tracks, as parents found it easier to supervise and keep an eye on them there.

Boys played balancing planks on tracks or pulled carts while the girls played with dolls or pretend cooked with stones and leaves.

Other games were tent making and badminton using plastic table tennis bats. As children grew older they moved to the river bank or the busy road to play away from adult supervision. In the Saphan Pla community in Thailand, pre-adolescent boys too preferred to play away from their home base which had a shaded sand pit area where mothers and young children played and socialized in the afternoon when they were off work. The boys preferred to play in the deserted dock area and the abandoned buildings near the water front.

For example, in the Saphan Pla community, which had received the most investment in developing community-based play and social spaces in the heart of the housing areas among the Thai sites under this research, typically younger children and girls preferred to play in the sandpits and the small playground. Pre-adolescent boys would play there sometimes but their real interest lay in moving away from the home base in order to play more freely.

Girls engaged in a lot of pretend play in both the Burmese and Kolkata migrant communities. They enacted long marriage ceremonies, walked the ramp, played guessing games with blindfolds on, took part in imaginary singing competitions or sold goods in mock markets or mimicked characters from television programmes or cartoons.

**\*Doms:** The word Dom refers to both the caste of funeral pyre tenders in the Hindu death ceremony as well as to the occupation of funeral pyre tending particularly for open pyre cremations. Throughout Northern India the Doms occupy the bottom rungs of the Hindu caste hierarchy, only ranking above the sweeper caste.

**“I love playing but there is no environment for a girl of my age to play.”**

Kabeeta Shrestha (name changed) is a 15-year-old girl in Sindupalchowk. Playing is one of her favourite activities, but with the pressure from study and responsibilities at home, she has limited access to play. Also, she feels shy to play in front of the elders as she is considered an equal to the adult female now. She usually plays during the tiffin break with her friends at school. At home, playing is almost impossible as her schedule is packed.



Children under 10 years played the most diverse games ranging across many types of play. With the onset of adolescence, children played less and in many cases stopped playing. In Nepal, adolescent girls used their free time, after completion of all domestic chores and homework, playing and talking on mobile phones. Sometimes, they hung out with their friends and gossiped. Older adolescent girls (15-18 years), in Nepalese culture and within this close-knit predominantly rural agricultural community, were considered grown-ups and not only did they have no social permission to play, they themselves also did not want to play at home or in the neighbourhood. However, they did play traditional games (chungu and dhyak) with peers in the school. Such play was very gendered, restricted only to girls and avoiding places where boys played.

The older girls in Nepal, particularly in the aftermath of the earthquake, did not get permission to play. But they did play games on their mobile phones secretly inside their homes and pretended to do something else when their parents came by. However, in the rural Burmese community, even though the adolescents worked like their counterparts elsewhere, and were subjected to many of the same social constraints (more on girls), they played much more than their counterparts in the urban Thai sites included in this research. The single biggest support that these adolescents, both boys and girls, received was access to large open fields, where they could still play freely and creatively while their parents were away at work, sometimes far away from home. In the case of Nepal after the earthquake, many of the open spaces in the villages were lost and also the hilly terrain had fewer flat spaces for playing than in the rice fields of Thailand. Loss of play spaces, social constraints as well as presence of adults near them restricted play for the rural girls in Nepal.

### 3.4.2 Nature of space and access conditions

In all the situations of crisis, children played mostly in unsafe places even when a few safe spaces were available to them. When children, particularly younger children, played freely in the heart of the community, in places where they had permission and access to play, a range of construction play, pretend play and social play was witnessed. For example, in the community-built sandpits of the Saphan Pla (urban Burmese migrant) community, children had fun filling plastic bottles with water, sand or rocks and pretending they were racing cars or tow trucks. They made water bombs by filling plastic bags with water and threw them at friends. They made bullets from mud, built houses and tunnels in the sand pits. The children who played along the railway track in Kolkata made houses with every conceivable material ranging from paper and sticks to styrofoam pieces to mud. These constructions would only stay on the tracks in between trains and irrespective of whether they were completely flattened or somewhat salvageable, the children renewed their building activities unfazed as the trains cleared the track.

**A 16-year-old boy in Japan said when he lived in the evacuation centre he was ten years old; he felt frustrated and helpless in that atmosphere of despair and grief, and had nothing to do. One week after the tsunami, he found a golf club and golf balls among the debris in the school ground. He used all his strength to hit the balls and pieces of the debris. This was the only way he had to “spit out” his frustration.**

In Nepal, children had parental permission to seek out safe open spaces in the devastated post-earthquake landscape to play with friends while parents were busy rebuilding their houses. What did children play? They mimicked what they saw around them, and built homes with any available loose parts just like their parents. They even role-played domestic scenes inside their newly constructed homes.

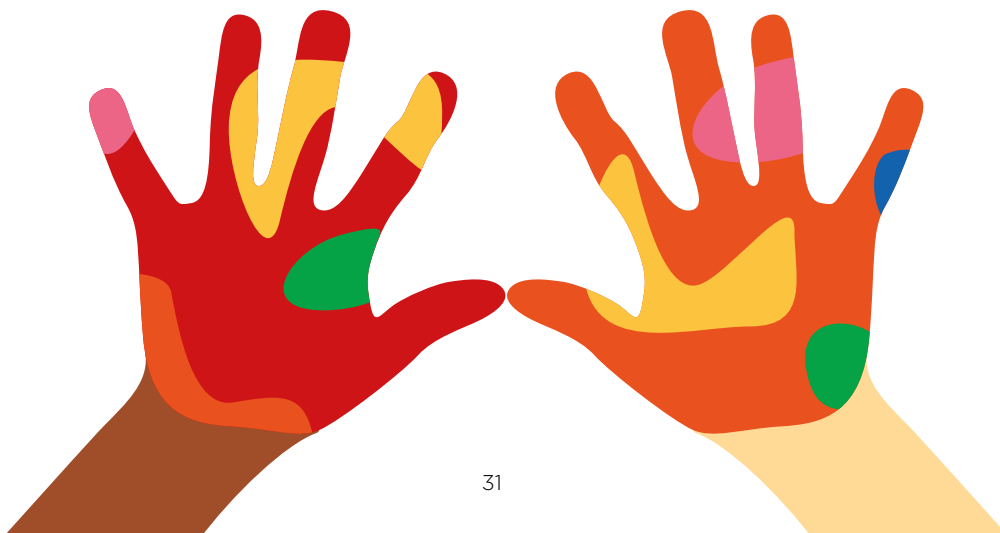
In Japan, parks and schoolyards became dominated by construction work for temporary houses and left-over spaces around them were covered in tarmac and used for parking cars. The landscape of devastation coupled with lack of permission to play inspired aggressive play outdoors or playing video games indoors, in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami when children were still living in the overcrowded evacuation shelters. When volunteers visited these shelters, children were able to have different experiences from playing video games. However, some of the children reported hitting the debris with sticks as a way to deal with their stress, expressed by one child as “allowing their stress to explode”.

In the informal tented shelters in Lebanon, children were observed to make use of every single available space, indoors or outdoors, whatever the conditions. Children played in between and inside the tents and shelters, in streets, parking, fields, and in the centres of Beyond Association. Children reported feeling tired, annoyed and bored after completing their daily tasks and when not allowed to play freely. Some described watching TV silently with a lot of anger as a way to cope in that situation, but whenever children found an opportunity, they made their own play objects from plastic, paper, and clothes etc. fashioning kites, puppets, or board games.

### **The affordances of high risk social and physical environments for play**

The greater the risks in the local environment, the riskier was the play of the children. The risky play observed in this research could be categorized as ‘deep play’ which is a play type and defined as play which allows the child to encounter risky or even potentially life-threatening experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear (Hughes 2001). Two patterns were observed:

**Actual risky play:** This applies mostly to boys but also to some girls who played in this way. There were places such as river banks or deserted buildings where children liked to go to play. By far the riskiest play witnessed during the course of the APC research was seen in Kolkata where boys from the age of eight built rafts from found loose materials and navigated the Hooghly river. The process of resourcing and building the raft and later using and protecting it, demonstrates the highest form of resilience in the face of tremendous structural challenges.



## Deep play and resilience in Kolkata

The favorite deep play of boys living in Nimtola Ghat Kolkata involved a raft, called a 'trawler' or 'shola', which they made themselves for sailing on the river even during high tide or a tidal bore (sudden backward surge from the estuary that swells up the river). They held floating parties on the trawler, used it for sailing on the river and also for crossing over to the opposite bank. Particularly during summer, boys used the trawler extensively to float in the middle of the river. In an environment which had no safe space for children to play, the trawler was an innovative way to claim territory in the biggest open space available to children, the Hooghly river. The trawler was made from the plastic mats used for laying out dead bodies on the floor of the crematorium for rituals before the cremation. They were discarded afterwards and collected by children in the late afternoon/early evening. The mats were used for making the outer case of the trawler. Children stuffed thermocol (styrofoam) pieces inside the cases and stitched them up. Styrofoam was collected from two fish markets in Baghbazar and Howrah, about 1-2 km away. These collections happened early in the morning when fishmongers unpacked fish and discarded the styrofoam packing cases. The newly made trawlers were first taken for a test run along the banks and only after a satisfactory run was the trawler taken farther into the river. Children also took great care to protect their trawlers and found suitable parking spaces where they could keep an eye on them, as adults were known to sail away on their trawlers at night to have parties.



## Increasing the risk in play using imagination:

Sometimes when children did not have access to the risky place of their choice, mostly due to parental prohibitions, they would settle for a less risky place but pretend that it was riskier. For example, in the urban Cambodian migrant community in Thailand, which had high environmental risks due to heavy vehicular traffic transporting sand from the port area, Cambodian children had no permission to play outdoors as most places were considered unsafe by parents. They would often compensate for this by sneaking into construction sites and climbing onto the back of delivery trucks in the parking lot to play there. When children played in areas that were dangerous and prohibited or when they had no other choice, they would create play formats such that they changed hazardous areas into a fun place. For example, they would imagine the areas to be an adventure park where they ran away from beasts or where they fought as warriors.

Sometimes children invented games to create a risky and thrilling feeling, for example, playing which is related to ghosts or spirits like Spirit Board that children saw on television programmes. In the urban Cambodian migrant community, one girl had been abducted and murdered in the recent past when her parents left her alone at night to attend a cultural programme. An imaginary game played by children in this community involved calling upon her ghost and asking her questions.

### Ghost Play

A child lies down in the middle, surrounded by his friends. He pretends to be taken by a ghost. His friends try to communicate with the ghost by asking the child the following questions.

**Q: Who are you?**

**A: My name is...**

**Q: How did you die?**

**A: I was hit by a car (or I drowned, etc.)**

**Q: Will you haunt us?**

**A: Yes.**

Everyone would run away. Or if the answer is no, children would keep asking.



### 3.4.3 Social and cultural context

As an expressive activity, play is very much influenced by the cultural and social context of the community. In the case of the urban Cambodian migrant community in Thailand as well as the Roma community in Kustepe in Istanbul, children were growing up in rough neighbourhoods seeing violence in the streets everyday. Their deep play in limited and often aggressive ways was perhaps a way of coping with the violence embedded in their community; it may also be indicative of internal distress. In either case it does suggest the need for specialized interventions to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities in children's lives while promoting the right to play in these contexts.

#### Coping with violence through deep play

The urban Cambodian migrant community that lived in an industrial area next to a sand barge port comprised many illegal migrant workers who had a marginalized existence within the majority Thai community from whom they rented rooms. There was no playground in the community. Children played in front of their rented rooms in the narrow alleys. Parents worked outside the neighborhood for long hours and many children were locked inside the house and played alone. The boys who did play outside played aggressively. They engaged in hitting each other, yelling, throwing stones at windows, shooting animals with slingshots and taking things from their neighbours without asking. Growing up in a harsh environment as an underclass in a different land, they had internalized the frustrations and anger that their community struggled with every day. Their deep play was a reaction and a way to cope with embedded violence.

In one of the neighbourhoods in Istanbul, a lot of aggressive play was witnessed in the street play of young Roma boys; they fought

with knives and burned trash. These boys were acting like the men around them. They were growing up in a rough neighbourhood where acting like a man involves being aggressive and tough. In the children's centre in that neighbourhood, although the children seemed to enjoy structured activities facilitated by the volunteers, they were on the look-out for opportunities to escape from the centre to catch a breath outside and come back. Both boys and girls of middle school age would do this. Even within the centre children resisted the structure imposed on them by singing out loud, shouting, or doing their own thing in defiance of the rules set by the university volunteers who came from different socio-economic backgrounds.

#### Coping through art and music

Sulukule, the Roma neighbourhood in Istanbul, which had been living in the shadow of evictions to make way for an urban redevelopment, despite poverty, was a thriving community with active streets where much socialization happened; people used to put carpets outside their homes for chatting with their neighbours while the children played outside under their watch. Today such social capital has been replaced by fear of demolitions and the children's immediate worry was to find a safer place to live and get quality education to get out of poverty. Instead of talking about it, children and young people found expression of their feelings in graffiti that adorned many public walls, and rap music. Both these art forms are forms of resistance against authority and hence befitting of a context where young Roma people are still facing the structural discrimination which their community has lived with for many centuries in Europe. They preferred practicing their art to playing in the municipal parks which had the same standard equipment in abiotic settings across all parks.



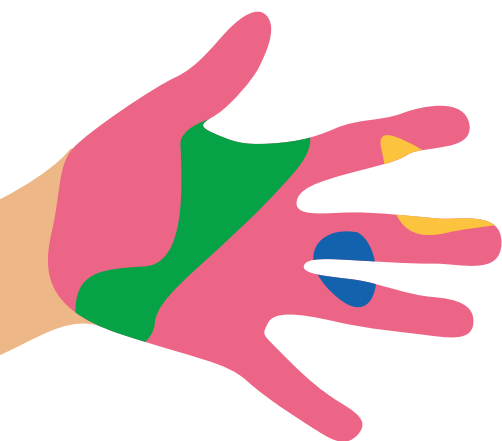
The Grasshouse children's centre moved to Tarlabasi neighbourhood after it was shut down in Sulukule to make way for the redevelopment. It still welcomed children from far off Sulukule over the weekend and engaged them in rap workshops offered by a group of youths who grew up in Sulukule in the shadow of the makeover projects and the gentrification that followed in its footsteps. Rap originated from and remains rooted in poor African American communities in the US and has been an effective medium for mostly black young people to make sense of an unjust social system where their lives are defined by negative stereotypes linked to violence, drugs, AIDS etc. (Blanchard n.d.).

This form of music is based on strong African oral traditions and allows young people to reflect on their daily life, racial and economic prejudice. Turkey too has a strong oral tradition of singing storytellers. The fact that the young participants in the rap workshop at Grasshouse thoroughly enjoyed the sessions speaks to the power of rap not only as a form of entertainment but also as an effective unifying tool of self-expression to address social, economic, and political issues for its audience. This also fits the conceptualization of play as an act of adaptation, interpretation and sense-making. The act of rapping by these children is an expressive activity that is embedded in and influenced by broad cultural traditions. It further allows children to make sense of historical, political, and economic circumstances that have systematically subjugated the Roma communities in poor Istanbul neighbourhoods and made them the target of unwanted top-down development decisions.

### 3.4.4 Permission

In all the situations of crisis parents restricted play in at least some places and at certain times, if not in all outdoor places and at all times. Among the research countries, the children of Japan after the earthquake had the least permission to play. While staying in the evacuation centres for up to six months after the disaster, the overcrowded, stressful atmosphere meant that permission to play was withheld, or children spontaneously refrained from playing outdoors and stayed indoors playing video games. In the next stage of the rehabilitation process, children were told by adults not to play around the temporary houses because the temporary houses had thin walls and the residents desired peace and quiet without being stressed by noise.

Thai parents withheld permission because as migrant workers they worked long hours away from home and because of the prejudices against them they did not want any trouble from the police or the host community. They feared for the children's safety when they played in unsafe places unsupervised, and from strangers, gamblers, alcoholics and drug addicts who freely roamed around their neighborhoods. They also wanted their children to study hard and not get into trouble while playing with the children of other communities.



## Seeking special and secret places

Sneaking out to play is one of the general coping mechanisms observed and reported by children. While staying in the evacuation centre in Japan, boys and girls tried to seek out secret places such as under the bridge, a place they had no parental licence to explore. They enjoyed catching fish in the river. More importantly they cherished the riverside as a place to have contact with nature. In the context of everyday crisis, despite lack of permission, children played in unsafe places where play was prohibited by adults; children can do this very well since their parents were often not around. This was particularly true in Kolkata and Thailand. The prohibited places were the places they liked to go the most. Those places were often places with water (for example, river, river banks, ponds, canals, waterways or waste water pipes) and were challenging and exciting to explore so children often sought them out secretly by themselves or with friends. For children these places were special and “essential to putting things together for themselves and becoming who they are” (Goodenough, 2003, p. 2).

In other studies, with children of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal (Hinton, 2000), evicted squatter settlers in Johannesburg (Swart-Kruger 2002) and Delhi (Chatterjee 2006, 2007), children were similarly seen to seek out nature along creeks and river banks, woods and gardens and vacant lots. Such spaces afforded them freedom of movement, opportunities for play and refuge and sustenance for body and spirit (Chawla, 2014). APC research findings are consistent with these other researches with one exception. In APC, because children were growing up in very high-risk environments, their notion of safety was relational. The railway track in Kolkata was considered a safer play space than a turbulent river though the river was preferred as it afforded contact with nature, openness and freedom. In Kolkata, girls were not allowed to go on the raft with the boys and participate in the most exhilarating play experience in Nimtola Ghat. Boys too had no parental licence to go the riverbank and particularly the Nimtola Ghat bank after dark as that riverfront space was taken over by adults and older boys for gambling, drinking and doing drugs. But such rules were often broken and boys did take their rafts out at night to the middle of the river to have a little celebration as they had seen many adults doing at night.

In Thailand, there were areas in the urban migrant communities where children had no access to play, particularly when parents were away at work. However, the more they were prohibited to play in high risk areas, the more they wanted to play there. Boys would sneak into places such as construction sites, wood warehouses and jump into delivery trucks in the parking lot. When adults approached they would run away for a while and come back to play soon afterwards.

**“My children loved to sneak out to play at the dock. No matter how many times I say no or how hard I punish them, they will go anyway. I don’t know what to do. When I asked them, they will change the subject? I don’t have time to look after them because I have to work.”**

One mother from Saphan Pla

**“It is a lot of fun to play at the deserted salt factory. We chase one another and climb in and out of the salt bags. If adults approach, we would hide. When they leave, we will start doing it again.”**

A boy in Saphan Pla age 7



## Defying authority for creative freedom

In Turkey, children's centres are a lifeline for Roma children in their neighbourhoods. When the Grasshouse children's centre (started by the Roma Rights Association) was shut down in Sulukule as part of the redevelopment project, a group of Roma youths (18-23 years) who had started a rap group called Tahribat-i Isyan and visited Grasshouse, had to make a choice between freedom and conformity. They were given permission by their municipality, who opened a Sulukule Art Academia in the new development, to practice rap there but on condition that their music was approved by the government and that they remained actively involved in the centre's programmes which included teaching a hobby (e.g., teaching a musical instrument) or helping children do their homework.

The group refused to give up their creative freedom. The Grasshouse centre had reopened in Tarlabasi neighborhood which was under the Sisli municipality that was managed by a more liberal political group than their municipality. So the teen rappers, despite a lack of official permission, took the children away from Sulukule over the weekends to far off Tarlabasi to teach rap at the reopened Grasshouse centre there. During the week, the centre catered to Tarlabasi children but over the weekend, it catered only to Sulukule children who had lost the only safe place which welcomed them in their community. And in these musical sessions, children from Sulukule found joy, teasing, joking and laughing with each other during rehearsals, under the caring mentorship of Roma youths who shared their background and uncertain future.

## Mixed messages from adults by way of permission

In the children's centres in the Turkish neighbourhoods, typically play was controlled by adult volunteers who had barely any training in playwork or facilitating children's play. Instead of providing space for innovation, the facilitation tactics often led to conflict between different children (boys and girls, ethnic groups etc.) as children could not freely choose what they wanted to play and who they wanted to play with. Working under cramped conditions with Roma children who came from families that were racially, socially and economically different from their own, the volunteers were

often overwhelmed and gave mixed messages, withdrawing permission one moment and reinstating it in the next, again expelling some children from a game, leading to much confusion and avoidance behaviour in children.

### Example of a children's centre in Istanbul, of volunteers withdrawing permission and sending mixed messages in the middle of a game

Five boys and four girls were playing a guessing game (a charade, with no words spoken) with a male volunteer. The girls formed one group and the boys the other. After a few rounds when the volunteer encouraged the groups to be more theatrical in their performances for the benefit of the guessing group, the boys protested and said, "We are out!" and walked out of the room.

They came back again almost immediately. The volunteer wanted them to watch the game if they didn't want to play. The boys began going out and coming back again and again. The volunteer got irritated and said, "If you interfere, you are out! I don't understand, you come and go again!"

One boy replied, "Teacher, you started this game with us. Why did you include the girls?"

"Because we do not discriminate. What is the purpose of coming in and going out, and screaming?" replied the volunteer.

The boys shouted, "Fuuuuunnnnnn!"

The volunteer responded, "There are rules when you are having fun. There are rights. Now GET OUT!"

This cyclic behavior continued for a few more times. Exasperated, the volunteer said, "Ok. Get out!" A little later he said, "If you do not want to play, do not play", but soon afterwards he changed his mind and said, "I forbid you to get out!"

The boys went out anyway, shouting "Ahhhhhh! The girls came and ruined the game."

### Strategies to cope with lack of permission for free play

Children adopted different strategies to cope with lack of permission for free play (that is, play under the children's own direction and control). These ranged from turning to technology such as watching television, becoming absorbed in smart phones or playing video games on their own devices or computer games at a game shop. Coping also took the form of playing with language as was most commonly seen in the children's centres in Turkey which did not allow free play outdoors.

In the Kustepe centre, one boy shouted a couple of times "Dad, Dad, send me to the school". His shouting imitated a gang leader. His friends laughed at this performance. They shouted, "Do it again, do it again". This is an example of free play using language as a tool for amusement and fun, or ludic language play (Cook 1997) where the speaker's use of the voice of another (gang leader) entailed a kind of role-play for comic effect. It also created a space for child-initiated free play and amusement within structured activities. Other examples of free play were also seen: a 10-year-old girl was walking around not involving herself in any activities. She tapped on the glass to annoy the boys and succeeded in distracting them. She offered a cue to play which the boys returned by chasing her around, pulling and pushing her (they did not hurt her).

When permission to go out and play was given even under the most stressful conditions such as in the aftermath of the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami, it led to responsible behaviour and self assessments of risks by children and a display of resilience.

### Example of the positive impact on children when permission for play is granted

In the Japanese crisis context, where children had no space or permission to play in their immediate surroundings within the temporary housing, seeking out secret play spaces away from the adult gaze and control sustained many children by allowing them to exercise their autonomy in making play choices. Typically, adults did not approve. However, one mother did. She simply did not say "don't do" too much and allowed her daughter to try out different things. Every day when her daughter returned from playing outside, the mother encouraged reporting and enjoyed listening to what her daughter did outdoors. This is what her daughter had to say about why this was important:

***"If adults rely on us to be ourselves, we can use our imagination to find a way to be, though we may sometimes be close to breaking when we challenge ourselves and do a dangerous thing, but it is better for us to have a chance to find a way by ourselves."***

### 3.4.5 Time

Even though educational pressure is one of the biggest reasons why children do not have free time to play and this was certainly true in Japan and in Turkey, most children in this research outside of Japan and Nepal did not regularly attend formal schools or age-appropriate classes. However, this did not mean they had free time to play as responsibilities of paid and unpaid work, and lack of safe spaces, conspired to prevent play across the research sites in Thailand, India, Lebanon and Turkey. Children are expected to study hard when education facilities are available such as in Mae Sot in Thailand. In those cases, children played at school before the first class, during lunch break and after classes. They also played during the weekends in their community.





In Japan, besides school, children attend two types of after school programmes: school clubs for sports and arts training, and private educational support classes, both of which limit their time for play. According to some critics, the education system in Japan has become a place of child labour where children are driven to work long hours to secure adequate results in competitive exams (Fields 1995). In the post-disaster situation as many areas were depopulated, schools were shut down and integrated, resulting in children travelling long distances by bus to commute to new schools. With long commutes and the demands of formal education and private after school programmes, time was increasingly a constraint on the free play of children in Japan.

The schools in Turkey did not permit free play even during recess. Teachers took away any props made by children such as newspaper footballs. The schools prioritized academic results due to the emphasis on exams and as a consequence, parents restricted time and withheld permission for play and other leisure activities. Most of the Roma children, on account of discriminatory practices, did not attend school regularly. Many school principals asked them to stay away because of the discomfort of non-Roma parents about Roma and non-Roma children mixing in school. Time was not an issue with Roma children, but lack of space for play was.

In the contexts where child labour, both paid and unpaid, was a reality, children managed to steal time from daily chores and played whenever possible.

***I have to help my parents doing housework, getting water, washing clothes and cooking before I can play. When I come back from school, I will finish my housework as fast as I can so I can have more time to play.***  
A child in Mae Sot in Thailand, age 10.

In Kolkata, work and play mingled seamlessly for girls when they went to the riverbank for washing clothes and utensils. They used the time of work to play using the materials they had at hand. They would wrap their mothers' sarees and pretend to be brides, and cook food in the utensils they had been given to clean. The responsibility of work which entrusted them with household goods provided the props for play which they otherwise lacked.

The children who worked in factories in Thailand too talked about having less time to play but they confided in the researchers that they secretly played while working when their employer was not around.

***I play drums with plastic buckets when the boss is not around. We make these plastic buckets in the factory. I also secretly eat some snacks.*** A boy aged 17, Saphan Pla Community.

Refugee children in Lebanon must go either to work in the agricultural land or to school if they can. Children are very much affected by the crisis and describe it as something horrible, terrifying, awful, dangerous, and full of deaths, problems and nightmares. Yet despite these perceptions, children are very happy to name lots of games that they play together such as football, basketball, hide and seek, rope pulling and racing, or other kinds of games that can be played alone such as puzzle games, playing with dolls, puppets, and modelling clay. Others prefer to play educational games related to storytelling, drawing, colouring or even practice making sentences, arranging words in sentences, and decorating their classrooms at school or centres. These games are played in the time remaining after work, and on completion of educational or home responsibilities.

## 3.5 Perceptions shaping play

### 3.5.1 Children

Children everywhere under the age of 10 years typically equated play with friends, fun and freedom. In Japan, despite lack of space, time and permission to play in the aftermath of the earthquake, as things started improving and some children moved back to their repaired homes or new homes, the thing that bothered them the most and prevented them from playing was the loss of friends after the tsunami as families scattered and relocated in different areas.

***"When we play, we are happy and we enjoy ourselves."*** Children aged 6-10 in Thailand.

***"Play helps us make friends. If someone does not play, he/she would not have friends."***  
Children aged 15-18 in Thailand.

***"Play is a way to express ourselves."***  
Girls aged 15-18 in Thailand.

Children engaged in labour in Thailand believed that play made them happy and helped them relax. It was not boring and they could make more friends from other communities as well. It gave them freedom because they could go out of the house other than for work.

Play needs to be exciting like the video games which provide an easy escape in difficult times. However, the Japanese children who participated in this research debated whether they should have to pay to play as video games cost money. They also discussed the importance of cultural events and festivals as they break the monotony of everyday life and children eagerly await events such as “Hare” and fireworks festivals in Japan.

The children in the ITSs in Lebanon reported on their dreams of having lots of tools and materials such as ropes, footballs, basketballs, puzzles, swings, toys, crayons, and colouring paper to enhance their playing environment. They dreamed of a place that was full of friends, safe, large, clean and healthy spaces. They yearned for a clean playground with green meadows, without dangerous animals, without stones and sharp tools, without fear of strangers and kidnapping. For them, an ideal place for playing is free of dangers, weapons of any kind, without fighting planes; a place that is always open to welcome them whatever the condition outside.

### 3.5.2 Parents

Parents had very different perceptions about play, which are based mainly on their hopes for their children’s future, cultural constraints on girls, and fear about children’s safety while outdoors. Even though some adults, such as in Nepal, said that play was important for children, by ‘children’ they meant younger children who were not yet capable of assisting parents with household work. The older children must be trained and made responsible for running the household.

***“Girls are meant to establish a new family in a new place with new people. They must learn everything. That is why we engage them more in work.”***

Adult male, Bhumlutar in Kavre, Nepal.

***“Most of the parents here want their children to learn the skills for the future. Thus, they emphasize work and study rather than play. But, play is not much restricted [for younger children]. Play is the most essential thing for the physical and mental development of the children.”***

Female Social Mobilizer in Kavre, Nepal.

Among the refugees in Lebanon, girls of 14 and above (and sometime younger) are not allowed to play as that would make it harder to convince men that they are ready for engagement or marriage.

Some parents rationalized the lack of play in older children by citing lack of proper play spaces, or concern that they will get dirty when they play outside and that creates more work for the mothers. They also cited addiction to technology as a reason their children lose interest in playing.

***“They lose interest in playing after they become older. My elder son is engrossed in his mobile phone every time I see him,”***

Mother from Bhumlutar in Kavre, Nepal.



Many migrant parents work overtime until night. They developed different coping mechanisms to keep their children safe while they were away. They forced their children to stay inside and gave them smart phones to keep them entertained indoors and in order to be easily reachable by parents who called their children regularly to check on them.

***“Whenever I have to work overtime, I will lock the house. I work until 8pm but I will always call to check if the children are safe. Sometimes I tell them not to play anywhere far. When I come home, seeing them at home, playing with their dolls, I am happy. I tell them after coming back from school if they finish their homework they could play on the road in front of our house.”*** Mother from urban migrant community in Thailand.

When adults perceived play to be important, they promoted it to the best of their knowledge and ability ranging from providing a sports field to mobile or pop-up play facilities.

***Children in this Learning Centre are able to play more than when they are in Myanmar because they can play soccer. We provide trainers and equipment for them. In Myanmar, they can only play somewhere in nature. Good play means playing soccer or volleyball in teams.*** Teacher, Parami Secondary Learning Centre, Mae Sot, Thailand.

A private individual, Mr. Shibata, who lost his own home in the tsunami, started the organization Rainbow Colour Crayon to help children play after the triple disaster in Japan. He explained that at first the adults did not understand the importance of play for children. This apathy towards play was apparent in the lack of playgrounds or any other play facilities on the temporary housing sites. However, when the adults saw that the “children recovered their smile through play activities”, facilitated through mobile or pop-up play spaces by different organizations, they could understand the importance of play for children and some of the adults even started supporting such play activities.

Fun, child-friendly play spaces gave children recovering from crisis a place to identify with and develop a sense of place, although most children complained that there were no places to play. One boy reported that after he lost his house and stayed in different places and

went to different schools, when he found the adventure playground Koganehama near his new home, he finally recovered from the trauma and loss of friends and felt that was “his place”. A playworker who came to build an adventure playground in Ishinomaki City after the tsunami recollected the following play experiences of children in another adventure playground in Kesennuma municipality in Miyagi prefecture:

***“Tsunami play was seen often at Asobi-ba. With a handmade equipment slide, a child gliding from the top plays the part of the tsunami. A child standing below is drenched, and may die or not, and beside the slide another child is positioned for announcing a major tsunami warning. They all survived on this occasion.”***

A big slide had been made with tsunami play in mind at Asobi-ba, where, in the summer time, children played by bucketing water down from the top of the slide, as tsunami play. This unstructured experiential play was self-initiated and self-organized by children after the disaster, where children were using play to work out their understanding of the tsunami. This play fits the description of Post Traumatic Play (PTP) and very much like the play therapists who study children’s use of language and nature of play to identify and offer treatment to those exposed to traumatic events, the designers of the Asobi-ba playground took note of the Post Traumatic Play of the children and provided enough environmental affordances for children to realize their fantasies and work out unresolved themes linked to the disaster. Whenever any child found the tsunami play scary and distressing, the playworkers stopped the game.

### 3.6 Attempts to promote the right to play in situations of crisis

Across the research contexts, attempts to promote the right to play by different organizations can most notably be seen in Japan, Thailand and Lebanon and to a lesser degree in Turkey and Nepal. In India, where the freest play was witnessed in the most hazardous conditions, securing the right to play depended very much on the individual creativity and resilience of children living in squatter settlements. Children’s drive for play combined with parental permission also saw much independent free play of children in the post-earthquake rural landscapes in Nepal in contrast to the tight control on children’s independent



mobility and free action in Japan where play could only happen through facilitation and interventions of volunteers, NGOs, playworkers and professional groups. The schools emerged as a great equalizer of play rights if girls had access to them; in Nepal when the girls went back to school after the earthquake they had access to the school grounds where they did play traditional games and sports irrespective of social expectations and conditioning. However disabled children were invisible in the research sites and no apparent work had been done to promote their right to play.

### 3.6.1 Post disaster play interventions in Japan

Save the Children Japan built a Children's Centre called 'Rights' using a participatory process involving children in Ishinomaki city. Participating children said that they wanted to have other places like the "Rights" centre where they can gather for free and make new friends. The children appreciated not only the pleasant physical settings offered by the centre but also the role of the staff in creating a safe, child-friendly and happy space for children to come together after the disaster.

The Japanese Adventure Playground Association supported local volunteer groups to set up temporary pop-up playgrounds. Eight adventure playgrounds were built in Ishinomaki City after the disaster. Japan, which already had a culture of mobile play through Play Cars (vividly painted cars carrying play materials to different locations for setting up temporary/pop-up play spaces), saw escalated mobilization after the disaster through the work of various non-profit organizations and some support from the UNICEF National Committee in Japan. The Playworkers Association, an NPO, was established to manage the Play Cars in three prefectures.

A two-day festival called Mini City Ishinomaki has been held every year from 2012 since the disaster. Modelled after Mini-Munich, which creates a mini city where everyday life in a big city is simulated through play, Mini City Ishinomaki reclaims the city centre that has been partly abandoned by businesses after the disaster and recreates the city's life. It also offers a networking platform for all organizations committed to rebuilding activities after the disaster.

### 3.6.2 Promoting play through community development in Thailand

Foundation for Child Development (FCD) is a Thai NGO that works on protecting the rights of migrant children. In the Saphan Pla Community, FCD engaged in an action research project to promote the right to play, which resulted in building a playground with the help of the community by reclaiming a muddy patch between two residential buildings. For two years volunteers brought toys and sports equipment to the community and played with the children. This helped to build trust in the NGO, which then secured funds from the Thai Health Promotion Foundation and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2013 to build the playground. Parents and children were asked to help in designing and building it and when it was finished, people in the community called it "Salor-Lukui-Sukretaw", which in Karen language, means "This Place Is the Best". Salor-Lukui-Sukretaw is more than a safe playground for children; it is the first leisure and creative place for migrant children, and also a socialization space for parents. The community volunteers manage to keep the place safe and clean.

After the success of this project, the Saphan Pla office gave permission to FCD to use another small piece of land located on the other side of the road to create a learning centre and migrant cultural space. After it was built, youths used it to practice Myanmar or Karen dance, to play games, to cook their local food (which is a vanishing practice), and to practice speaking Myanmar, Karen and Tai Yai languages in addition to using it for free play.



In the rural Burmese community, adults in the community join in playing soccer, badminton or Sepak Takraw (a traditional Burmese game). Adults helped to build a soccer field. In the urban Cambodian community, part of the pavilion located in the Civil Protection Volunteers Office has been made into a play corner where children's activities are organized by FCD with the support of a local Thai community leader.

Among the two urban migrant communities in this study, the Burmese migrants in Saphan Pla seemed to have been more proactive in promoting access to play for children than the Cambodian migrants. This may be due to the Burmese migrants being the more dominant migrant group in Thailand and having longer and more established networks, including with the development community. They also have strong leaders in their community. Together these factors have contributed to a greater sense of community among the Burmese who are able to keep alive their cultural, traditional and religious practices, have connections with other Burmese migrant groups in other areas and remain connected to their home country. With the help of FCD, the Saphan Pla community was thus able to secure some play infrastructure for their children in the barren urban context where they find work.

### **3.6.3 Right to play in emergency in Lebanon**

BEYOND Association has been working in the Syrian emergency context for the last four years, providing vital healthcare and child protection services, psychosocial support and recreational activities. It is one of the first NGOs working in that emergency situation to promote access to play for children. Even though strict guidelines and protocols are followed while working with children in emergency situations, which typically do not include the right to play, BEYOND's work stands out. They not only fulfil minimum standards guiding their child protection work but truly go beyond. In some places, where the displaced camps were very crowded with no safe place for children to play, BEYOND association rented land near the camps and created a safe zone for children's play. When there was a fire that burned down 75 tents in one of the Syrian camps, BEYOND animators and medical teams set up tents to create a safe place for children to play. First, the activities were focused on helping children overcome their fears and trauma, then children

were encouraged to play, and gradually community outreach work led to the Syrian community facilitating children's free play and even adults joining in to play with the children.

### **3.6.4 Child Friendly Spaces in Nepal**

Child Friendly Spaces are increasingly acknowledged as being important in crisis situations for protecting children and as a means to provide psychosocial support to children. In spite of the potential for rapid deployment at relatively low costs with scalability and adaptability of activities to diverse contexts, only two CFSs were opened in Kavre district (CWISH, n.d.), which had a population of 381,937 (as per Census 2011) and about 46 in Sindhupalchowk district in Nepal (UNICEF, 2015). Each of the Kavre CFSs catered to about 40-50 children who were typically selected by their teachers to join the CFS. These children were made aware of critical protection issues such as child labour, child sexual abuse and other rights that might be violated in the aftermath of the earthquake. The children played games at the beginning of the sessions as ice breakers. The CFS was well stocked with play and games materials and the children felt happy about that. The few children who got to participate in the CFS reported feeling happy about the chance to learn new things and to get away from the stressful environment of their everyday settings.

### **3.6.5 Children's centres/clubs in Turkey/Nepal**

In Turkey and Nepal, the two APC research contexts where there were available spaces for children, the children's centres and child clubs respectively, promoting the right to play was not a mandate though play did happen in these settings in varying degrees. The children's centres in Turkey were more focused on homework and cultural activities through controlled adult facilitation. The child clubs in Nepal, though created as platforms for securing children's rights, are currently running projects of different organizations, working with different agendas. They support the clubs to promote specific rights and tackle specific issues such as child marriage, child labour, discrimination or hygiene. Given the indivisibility of child rights, the right to play is as important and valid as any other right of the child, but as no organization is actively promoting the right to play in Nepal, child clubs are not spaces where children can engage in free play.

# Section 4: Lessons from the APC research



# 4 Lessons from the APC research

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The myriad forms of play that were witnessed in these many different situations of crisis across the world speak to the capacity and resilience of children to overcome adversity, survive stress and rise above disadvantage (the very definition of resilient children by Rutter 1979). The situations where we saw the most access to play in the wider geographic area had:

- supportive adults (“Go play” is seldom heard in some cultures but not saying “don’t play” is also a big support in most contexts)
- spaces with rich environmental affordances with varying degrees of risk which children learned to manage
- and fewer restrictions on children’s time.

Under these conditions play emerged as a living resource and not a commodified product, a resource that allowed children to regain and retain normalcy under the most difficult and challenging living conditions.

Even as the children who played freely and creatively in the most challenging of environments emerge as resilient beings, as Luthar and Goldstein (2004) noted, “if children are faced with continuing and severe assaults from the external environment, then they simply cannot sustain resilience adaptation over time—regardless of how much they are helped to believe in themselves, how intelligent they are, or how well they learn to regulate their emotions,” (p503). It is indeed a profound challenge, reducing risks in children’s lives and increasing protective factors on one hand and providing access to free play to fulfil the right of the child to the pleasure of childhood.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasizes the importance of providing the right to play for children in situations of conflict, humanitarian and natural disasters:

“The rights provided for in Article 31 are often given lower priority in situations of conflict or disaster than the provision of food, shelter

and medicines. However, in these situations, opportunities for play, recreation and cultural activity can play a significant therapeutic and rehabilitative role in helping children recover a sense of normality and joy after their experience of loss, dislocation and trauma. Play, music, poetry or drama can help refugee children and children who have experienced bereavement, violence, abuse or exploitation, for example, to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives. Such activities can restore a sense of identity, help them make meaning of what has happened to them, and enable them to experience fun and enjoyment. Participation in cultural or artistic activities, as well as in play and recreation, offers children an opportunity to engage in a shared experience, to re-build a sense of personal value and self-worth, to explore their own creativity and to achieve a sense of connectedness and belonging. Settings for play also provide opportunities for monitors to identify children suffering from the harmful impact of conflict.” (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013:17.)

## 4.1 Obligations of States parties

Article 31 imposes three obligations on States parties to guarantee that the rights it covers are realized by every child without discrimination:

- (a) The obligation to respect requires States parties to refrain from interfering, directly or indirectly, in the enjoyment of the rights provided for in Article 31;
- (b) The obligation to protect requires States parties to take steps to prevent third parties from interfering in the rights under Article 31;
- (c) The obligation to fulfil requires States parties to introduce the necessary legislative, administrative, judicial, budgetary, promotional and other measures aimed at facilitating the full enjoyment of the rights provided for in Article 31 by undertaking action to make available all necessary services, provision and opportunities.

### 4.1.1 Due attention should be given to the obligations with regard to post-conflict safety

Active measures should be taken by governments to restore and protect the rights under Article 31 in post-conflict and disaster situations, including, inter alia:

- Encouraging play and creative expression to promote resilience and psychological healing;
- Creating or restoring safe spaces, including schools, where children from diverse backgrounds can participate in play and recreation as part of the normalization of their lives;
- In areas where landmines pose a threat to the safety of children, investment must be made to ensure the complete clearing of landmines and cluster-bombs from all affected areas. (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013: 19.)

## 4.2 Recommendations

The APC projects in different contexts developed many recommendations for promoting the right to play of children in different situations of crisis to address the above mentioned challenging issues. These recommendations were discussed at a research workshop in Bangkok with all the research partners and further developed by including some of the recommendations from the APC toolkit developed by IPA through the parallel Access to Play in Crisis training resource development project.



## 4.2.1 Large scale disasters (natural and humanitarian crisis)

### PROVISIONS

**1. Pop-up play/mobile play:** In the immediate aftermath of a large scale natural disaster such as an earthquake, tsunami or a humanitarian crisis (e.g. the Syrian refugee crisis) where populations have lost homes and had to relocate in large numbers to other places, pop-up play and mobile play opportunities can be created by visiting staff or volunteers with skills in facilitating play in every village, city ward, and settlement at least on a weekly basis. Pop-up play spaces can be small scale, close to temporary shelters/home, adaptable in any context and quickly scalable through a network of organizations working together to mobilize playthings, playworkers, training of volunteers and vehicles for transporting play to children.

**2. Safe gathering spaces:** These can be created in a safe open space with territorial markers such as poles, flags etc. and/or can be in a separate tent from temporary housing to prevent adults from claiming this space. This space will allow children to play safely in the midst of the destruction around them and also provide a space for workers providing support to children to gather and coordinate action.

**3. Child Friendly Space (CFS):** Eventually the safe gathering spaces can be converted into CFSs but not as one-off interventions catering to a select few children. Initially, these need to be deployed in adequate numbers to provide access to all children affected by a disaster at the village or urban ward level, with particular efforts to reach and involve marginalized children including children with disabilities, and out-of-school girls and boys. Eventually some of these CFSs should become community spaces for children's participation in local area development and disaster risk reduction planning and training: at least one in every district (rural) or ward (urban).



These spaces should allow children to gather, engage in free play, make friends, access information and express their views. Children greatly value and benefit from engaging in their own freely chosen and self-directed play and as such should have the opportunity to initiate and participate in such play and not just in adult-led and adult-chosen activities. Without promoting play for its own sake, CFSs are missing the opportunity to fulfil an unmet need in children, and without providing for play CFSs are undermining their own purpose of being 'child friendly spaces' for children. Municipal budgets should be allocated for running these spaces for and with children, actively supporting children's expression, participation and freedom of association.

**4. Adventure playgrounds:** With the help of playworkers, volunteers and professional landscape architectural/planning associations, parks and recreation bodies, it is possible to set up adventure playgrounds in a post disaster landscape using found materials and involving children. A small percentage of rebuilding materials should be set aside for children to play with, building their play dwellings and communities, enacting the experience and making sense of the disaster at their own pace and terms. This form of play was witnessed across all the APC research sites where children had access to loose parts.

**5. Natural Spaces:** Children come to understand, appreciate and care for the natural world through exposure, self-directed play and exploration. Access to natural spaces, as was seen in this research, allowed children to cope with stress and trauma. With the help of volunteers, children's access to parks, gardens, forests, riversides, beaches and other natural areas should be restored within programme activities.

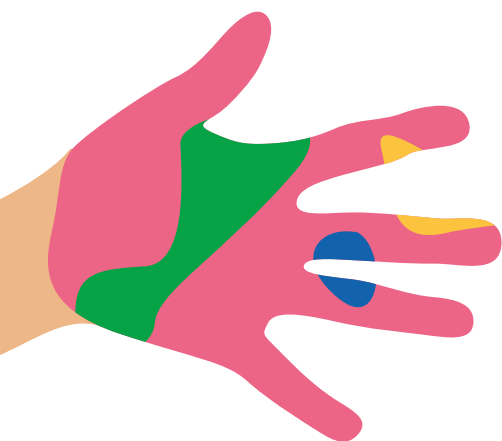
## ADVOCACY

**1. Child-friendly layout and design of temporary housing and evacuation centres:** While laying out temporary housing, space should be allocated centrally for gathering and for common use, ensuring space is protected for play by girls and boys of different ages, religious and ethnic groups. In large temporary housing, play space for small children should be scattered throughout so that it is easily accessible to all children. Larger recreational and sports facilities, like space for football, may be more reasonably placed towards the periphery of the settlement. See pages 17-19 of the APC toolkit for more details on actions for overcoming the challenges of location and unsafe characteristics of spaces to promote play.

**2. Raising awareness on the importance of access to play in crisis:** Through advocacy with policy makers, the right to play should be integrated in any emergency response as part of basic humanitarian aid.

**3. Amend the minimum child protection standards of the UN agencies to include the right to play:** Creating a safe place for play must be included in the planning and designing of shelters for crisis-affected communities. Playing should be recognised as a form of self-protection for children.

**4. Training of staff working in emergency response:** Staff should receive suitable training to promote access to play and the importance of play among community members, parents, caregivers and the children themselves.





## 4.2.2 Structural crisis of living in poverty, insecurity and discrimination

### PROVISIONS

#### 1. Play spaces in residential areas and schools:

Numerous interlocking play spaces of different scales and character are needed to cater to the needs of girls and boys of different ages. These spaces should be supported by adults in residential areas and schools who understand the importance and characteristics of play. Playing can serve as a therapeutic activity for children with limited access to education, socialization and recreational opportunities. Availability of a safe play space close to home also helps parents to give permission more easily to children to go outside, allowing children more access to play.

#### 2. Play spaces should be designed with children's participation:

Involve children in designing play spaces and build with the help of the community. This will help to provide play areas that are relevant and suitable to girls and boys of different ages, and it will help to create a sense of ownership in the community which will then be more willing to manage and maintain the space.

#### 3. Play equipment and characteristics of outdoor play spaces:

Good spaces to play within a community can create social hubs, offering opportunities for adults and young people to become involved and socialize together. To make the most of a play space, children need to be able to adapt and shape it to meet their play needs and it needs to change over time and provide new opportunities for play.

Key features of good outdoor play spaces or things to consider:

- Spaces are designed with the needs and characteristics of the local community in mind in identifying location and likely range of use and users
- Spaces have a distinct local character in terms of the design, materials and features included
- Spaces include play materials and play features that are non-prescriptive and therefore encourage imagination and suggest many different ways of being played on or with
- Spaces include loose parts which can be manipulated and moved by the children as they play, and replenished by adults and children from found, natural, recycled and donated materials.
- Spaces do not rely mainly on manufactured play equipment for the play opportunities offered.
- Whenever possible, play spaces should provide access to nature.

For factors for an optimum environment, see GC17 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013: 10-11.)

#### 4. Providing all weather indoor play spaces in the neighbourhood:

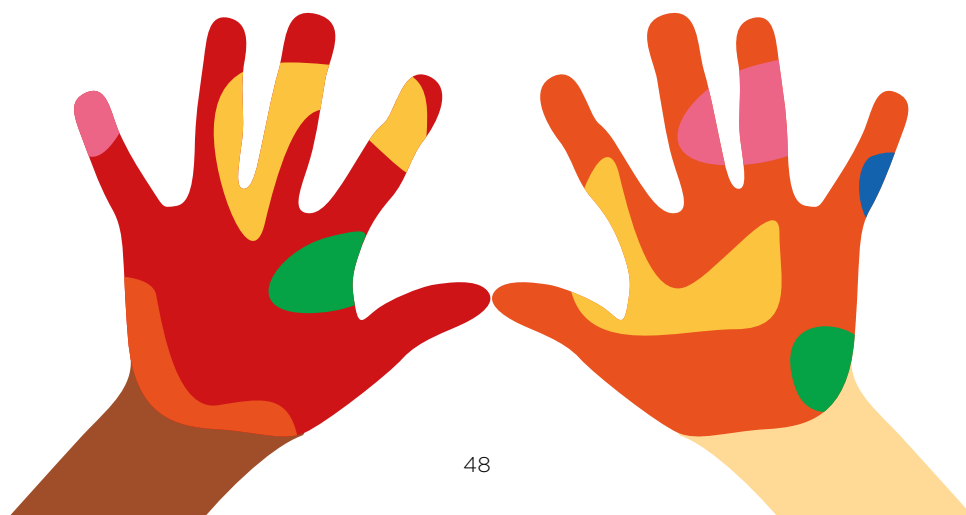
Well-designed indoor spaces for playing should be planned so that children are able to use them freely, in terms of access and for how long, with whom and in which ways they play. Indoor spaces can be used flexibly to provide other services and support other activities such as good early childhood care and education services, child clubs after school hours and weekends and can act as a springboard for children's participation and community involvement. The aim of providing for children's need to play should not be subsumed in other activities and agendas.

#### 5. Outreach play programmes on-site in the neighborhood:

This involves a team of staff and/or volunteers, visiting parts of the neighbourhood at regular times (for example, once or twice a week for a couple of hours). They come equipped with ideas and equipment, and work to help children find places to play in their local area and to reassure parents that it is safe for children to play. These sessions help to increase child and parental engagement in the right to play and encourage families to create safe play spaces in their local area. Assistance can be given to parents to form volunteers' groups which function as a network to protect identified favorite play spaces of children or reduce risks in hazardous and dangerous places (for example, improving physical conditions by demanding regular garbage collection, street lighting, sidewalks, signalled traffic crossings etc.).

## ADVOCACY

- Awareness drives within communities for educating parents and community members: These should be undertaken to create awareness on the importance of access to play for girls and boys, including children with disabilities, and the role of parents and community in supporting this.
- Good quality childcare centres for young children should promote play: Provide universal and equitable access to quality early childhood care and education centres with safe and child-friendly conditions within the community.
- Teacher training to better understand the right to play: Training should be provided to ensure that educators have the skills and knowledge to manage and facilitate play in schools, particularly for children under 14 years.
- Play training of volunteers and staff: Training for all volunteers and staff who work at after school centres and children's clubs should be provided. Staff and volunteers should be able to observe children's play and understand when and how to intervene; if children's play demonstrates a dominance of a potentially harmful play type, children may benefit from the opportunity to engage in other forms of play such as creative play, imaginative play and object play.
- Protection of children from harm: Child protection policies, procedures, professional ethics, codes and standards for all professionals working with children in the field of play, recreation, sports, culture and the arts must be introduced and enforced. Recognition must also be given to the need to protect children from potential harm that may be imposed by other children in the exercise of their rights under Article 31.
- Government and local authorities should take adequate steps: Efforts are needed to plan the local environment to be safer and friendlier for children's free play and independent mobility. See GC17 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013: 17-22) for States parties' obligations to respect, protect and fulfil children's Article 31 rights in full.



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IPA's purpose is to **protect, preserve** and **promote** the child's right to play as a fundamental human right.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

“Every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.”



**International Play Association**  
promoting the child's right to play

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