

CHILDREN AT THE CENTRE

Participatory Action Research Executive Summary

This paper is a brief of “Children at the Center, Participatory Action Research in Thailand’s Deep South”, a report written by Greg Tyrosvoutis, Watcharapon Kukaewkasem and Wirachan Sirisanti for Save the Children’s Local Engagement to Advocate for Peace (LEAP) project.

BACKGROUND

Since 2004, the Deep South of Thailand (Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat provinces) has seen a resurgence of ethno-nationalist conflict that has cost thousands of lives, damaged relations between Thai Buddhists and Muslim Malays and led to significant education disruption. Between 2004 and 2017, nearly 7,500 fatalities, mostly civilian, and over 12,000 injuries were attributed to the conflict (DSID).

Conflict drivers are rooted in grievances of Muslim Malays against perceived systematic discrimination and forced assimilation by the Thai State identity in a region where minority ethnic and language groups account for over 75% of the local population. Economic inequities and the lack of opportunity for youth in the Deep South have also been identified as important drivers.

Loss of parents, interrupted education, restricted movement and ever-present military are common occurrences for children growing up in these provinces. Children are found to live with insecurity and fear on a daily basis and are frequently victims or witnesses of violence, including shootings and bombings (UNICEF 2014). According to Panyayong and Juntalaseña (2012), a significant number of children – around 22% - live with Post-Traumatic Syndrome Distress (PTSD) (Panyayong, Juntalaseña, 2012).



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**PLEASE STOP THE CONFLICT. EVERYONE
NEEDS TO THINK ABOUT THE CHILDREN.
EVERY DAY WE ARE AFRAID TO GO TO
SCHOOL. EVERY DAY KIDS ASK THEMSELVES,
“IS IT SAFER TO STAY HOME OR GO TO
SCHOOL?”. WHEN WE GET TO SCHOOL, WE
BEGIN TO WORRY IF WE WILL BE ABLE TO
GET HOME SAFELY.**

”
– Child, Pattani

‘CHILDREN AT THE CENTER’ A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR)

A collaborative research was commissioned in early 2018 by Save the Children to gather the views of 458 children (238 girls, 220 boys) on the impact of the conflict, identify their views of what peace looks like, and determine how children can more meaningfully contribute to peaceful social cohesion. Quota sampling was utilized to ensure the numbers of Buddhist (21%) and Muslim (79%) children (aged 12-17) reflected the proportions of children living in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Additionally, a diverse and purposeful sample of key informants consisting of local authorities, military representatives, religious leaders, provincial authorities, education leaders, parents, teachers, and local civil society organizational leaders in all three provinces were interviewed.

This research sought to promote child participation in two key dimensions: using collaborative approaches to develop the research tools and encouraging child participants to comfortably express themselves during youth-led focus group discussion. Throughout this research, children shared their concerns and recommendations to improve child participation in peacebuilding and promote social cohesion. This briefer shades a light on children voices and promotes their solutions to alleviate the tensions in the region.



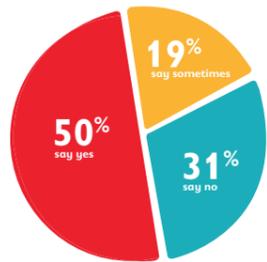
WHAT CONFLICT MEANS TO CHILDREN?

Depictions and descriptions of guns, tanks, bombs, the destruction of property, and people crying were in many of the children's drawings, graphic scenes of violence between soldiers and people wearing traditional Islamic clothing were common. Themes of religious exclusion and segregation, oppression and disagreement were present in children's verbal responses. Many children also identified the visible presence of garbage and trash in and around their communities. It may suggest that other aspects of the unrest may have been normalized to the point that children don't comment on them or it can also reflect children's vision of "child participation in peacebuilding" as some communities have children perform community clean ups.



When asked to describe **peace** children elicited major themes of religious harmony, people helping each other, the absence of visible violence such as bombs and shooting, freedom of movement, and all people being treated equally.

CHILDREN WERE ASKED IF THERE IS PEACE IN THEIR COMMUNITY?



CHILDREN'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PEACEBUILDING INITIATIVES:

“
AT THE BEGINNING I WAS AFRAID TO LEAVE MY HOUSE.
AFTER THE SITUATION HAPPENED AGAIN AND AGAIN IT BECAME NORMAL TO ME.
 ”

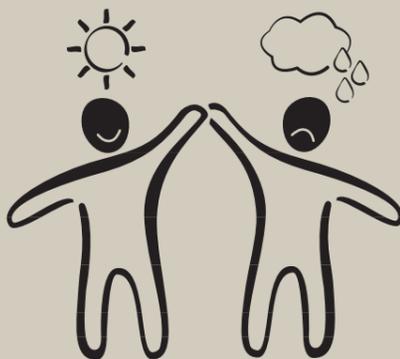
– Child, Yala

- Sporting events that bring together children of different faiths
- Camps/retreats that allow children to learn and express themselves away from their traumatic settings
- Exchange events for children of different faiths to learn about each other's religion
- Events led by university student role models to motivate and mentor youth leaders
- Child-led peacebuilding campaigns that allow children to express themselves without adult intervention or influence
- In-school and community-based peacebuilding training
- Promotion of healthy, positive and safe extracurricular activities such as motor bike clubs, community clean-ups, and distributing donations to families in need
- Intentional inclusion of children and youth in community leadership and monthly community meetings

HOW DO CHILDREN COPE WITH CONFLICT?



Happy child coping mechanisms:
 “do activities with friends”, “play sports” “talk to family members, teachers and friends” and “try to avoid being alone by participating to activities” to manage their stress.



Negative mechanisms:
 “keeping my feelings to myself”, “staying alone”, “not getting involved (in activities)”, drawing a lot of attention, being overtly visible and dramatic*, dropping from school*, common use of drugs (nam gatom, yaba, marijuana)*, criminality*

*feedback drawn from the key informant interview

IMPACTS OF THE CONFLICT ON CHILDREN

The substantial length of unrest in the Deep South has meant that for children under the age of 14, violence and disruption is all they have ever known. The most prominent theme identified during the data analysis workshop was the emotional and long term mental health impacts the conflict has had on children. Children described feeling “**unsafe**”, “**paranoid daily**”, “**afraid**”, “**tired of conflict**”, and “**uncomfortable**”. Many children described that they have felt unsafe and scared for so long that the feeling has become normal for them.

Prevalent Mental Health Concerns	Increase in Out-of-School Children	Widespread Opportunity Disparity Compared to the Rest of Thailand	Frequent Educational Disruption due to Attacks
Exaggerated Gender-Based Vulnerabilities	Negative Coping Mechanisms ie. Drugs, Violent Behavior, Self-Harm	Stereotyping Isolates Boys and Girls from the Deep South from Other Children	Parallel School Options Act to Segregate Buddhist and Muslim Children

CHILD PARTICIPATION IN PEACE BUILDING AND DECISION MAKING

Achieving authentic child participation and child-led action remains an endemic challenge in the Deep South. When asked about the obstacles children face in order to participate and lead peacebuilding activities, the two most frequent responses related to a lack of empowerment from adults: ignoring children's voices, and not encouraging participation. Children shared that when they have requested support from adults to be more involved in leadership roles (whether at school or in their communities) it is rarely acknowledged, leaving children feeling powerless. Children's most frequent responses indicated a lack of meaningful participation in peacebuilding activities – most activities were led by adults with children being told to participate.

Perceived Barriers to Participation in Peacebuilding and Decision-Making by the Children Themselves:

- Lack of Encouragement from Adults
- Travel Safety Concerns
- Children's Voices are Controlled by Adults
- Lack of Budget
- Fear of Military and Checkpoints
- Adults Don't Listen to Children's Voices
- Children Ask for Assistance but it is not Received
- Overcrowded Academic Schedules

TO SUPPORT CHILDREN IN ACHIEVING THESE OBJECTIVES, WE RECOMMEND TO:

Support local village- and sub-district level leaders and communities themselves with budget exclusively for children to lead, facilitate and design their own community-based activities. Budget should be allocated to existing structures for children such as youth councils.

Additional safe spaces are needed for children to play and express themselves. Venues/activities specifically promoting child participation and child-led action and platforms where girls and boys are comfortable to express themselves are needed to raise awareness and empower children. Examples could be student-led project fairs, art shows, poetry readings, or cultural shows.

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THE INTERVIEWED BOYS AND GIRLS WERE MORE COMFORTABLE TO TALK WITH THEIR PEERS THAN ADULTS. IT CREATED A SAFE SPACE FOR CHILDREN TO FREELY EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS. THE CHILD RESEARCHERS USED SIMPLE LANGUAGE THAT THEIR FRIENDS RECOGNIZED, SO IT WAS EASY FOR THEM TO UNDERSTAND. WHEN ADULTS LED, WE DID ICEBREAKING ACTIVITIES TO MAKE THE CHILDREN FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE, BUT WHEN THE CHILDREN LED, THE GROUPS WERE ALREADY COMFORTABLE.

”

– CSO Research Assistant, *Yala*

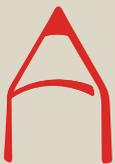
RECOMMENDATIONS TO MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF CONFLICT:



Increase access to mental health and child protection services – especially in rural areas – for children, parents and caregivers affected by the conflict.



Promote a localized curriculum focused on community history, indigenous knowledge, local ethnicities, religions, environment, and culture. More opportunities to learn in different languages, specifically Pattani-Malay, to remove language barriers of children wanting to access government schools.



Support institutions of higher education to upscale the provision of vocational training and life skills for children – especially for out of school children – that lead to tangible work opportunities.



Promote positive role models for boys and report youth recruitment in armed groups to the MRM.



Promote flexible pathways of recognition that enable children enrolled in Pondok and private religious schools to attend government schools and provide non formal education opportunities with nationally recognized certification for children wishing to access higher education.



Promote youth-led activities that are inclusive of girls.



Support is needed for hospital-based and mobile medical staff to be able to provide awareness activities for children centered on personal health and drug use. Based on the principles of harm-reduction, preventative approaches such as drug deterrence and rehabilitation programs could have significant impacts when compared to the current legal solutions.



Expand access to the government education system through scholarship.

THE LOCAL ENGAGEMENT TO ADVOCATE FOR PEACE (LEAP)

The LEAP project supports 10 local civil society organizations (CSOs) in the 3 provinces that make up Thailand's Deep South: Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala. With the support of Save the Children, these local partners empower children through direct activities and advocating for a more child-friendly and inclusive society. The LEAP project supports CSOs and children themselves to both voice and structure their demands to tackle injustice and inequality. It aims at strengthening the organizational and technical capacity of CSOs in the Deep South, enhance the evidence base, and promote the participation of children in constructive dialogue. Working in close collaboration with local authorities (LAs), CSOs aim to appropriately and safely engage children and youth in advocating for the protection of children.

The LEAP project is funded by the European Union and is implemented in three provinces: Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat.