Accountability Matters in Emergencies

Listening to children and responding to their feedback during Save the Children's humanitarian response in Myanmar (Burma)

Save the Children

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Save the Children is the world's leading independent children's rights organization, with members in 29 countries and operational programmes in more than 100. We fight for children's rights and deliver lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

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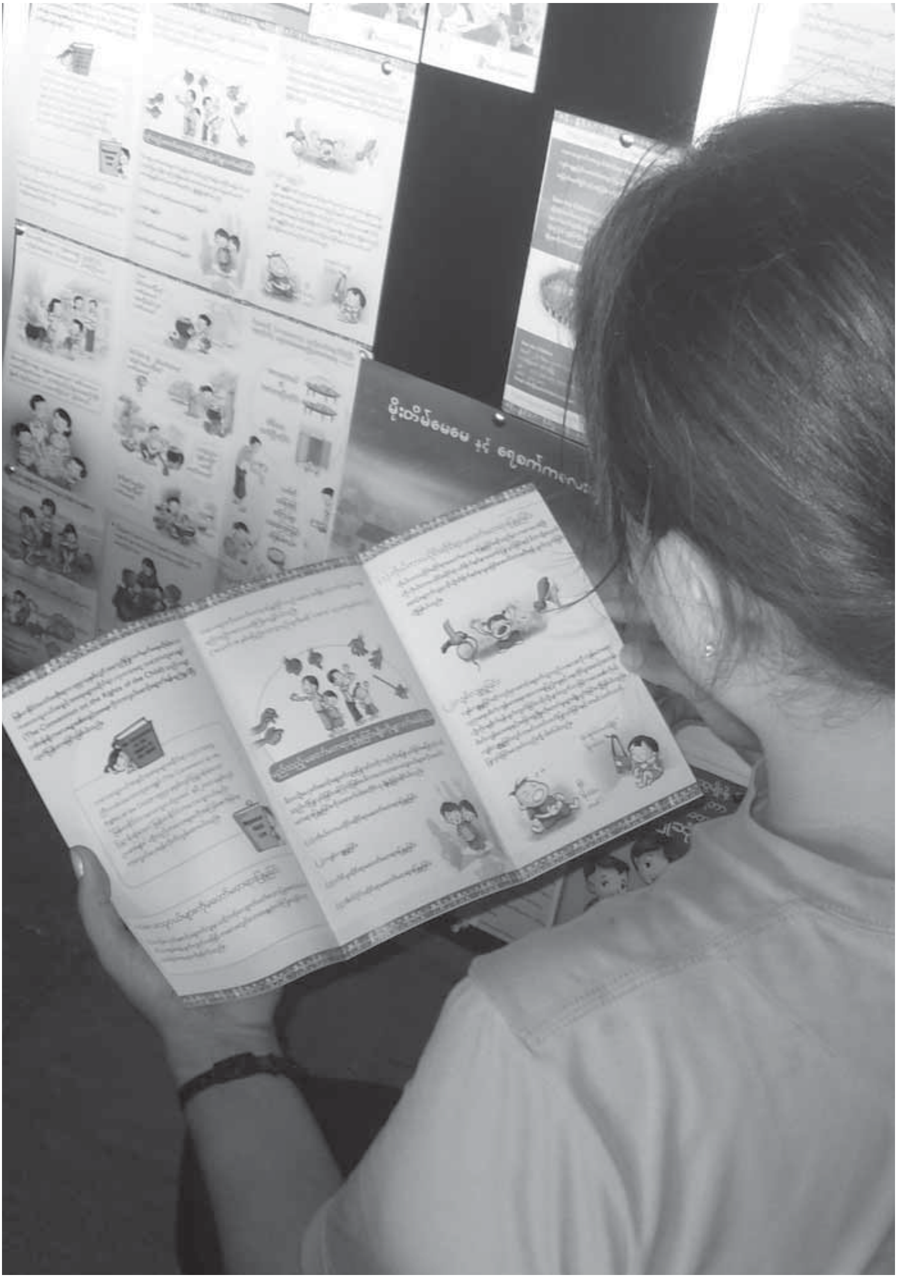

Different materials on display at Save the Children's information centre in Kyauk Tan village

Introduction

How can we make ourselves more accountable to the children and communities we work with and for, and maximise the quality and impact of what we do when we respond to humanitarian disasters through our emergency programming? What tools work well in different situations, and in different cultural contexts? What are we trying to achieve by making ourselves, as an organisation, more accountable, not just upwards (to donors) but downwards, to the people we're trying to get aid to (project beneficiaries)? Where do we start?

This case study was written to share our experience of setting up information centres in Myanmar (Burma) after Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008. We wanted to capture the lessons learned, and share practical suggestions with other programme staff and practitioners. Here, we describe what we did, how we did it, and some of the key considerations involved. We also describe what we achieved, and the lessons we learned through our accountability self-assessment.

We piloted a number of approaches to making our emergency response more accountable and, ultimately, more effective. First, we set up information centres linked to food distribution points. Then, we set up an information centre that worked closely with peer educators, who used creative ways of promoting children's participation and finding out their views. Based on our experience with these two pilots, we developed a 'general information centre' model. The idea was that children and adults in a given village (whether individuals or representatives from other organisations) could give us feedback about any of our activities, across all sectors: education, child protection, health, nutrition, livelihoods, and disaster risk reduction. We also developed a clear procedure for handling complaints from project beneficiaries.

We hope this case study answers some of the key questions about how we become a more accountable organisation. We also hope it inspires others to find the best ways of improving their accountability to children and their communities, whatever the context.

What is accountability?

According to the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), 'accountability' is the means by which power is used responsibly. HAP has set out seven fundamental principles that all organisations responding to emergencies should follow. Save the Children aims to reach the children and adults in communities worst affected by an emergency, especially those who are most disadvantaged (including the poorest families, children who are orphaned or have been separated from their families, and children with disabilities).

Accountability can work horizontally or vertically; in the latter case, accountability can be upwards (to the donors who fund emergency programmes) or downwards, to the communities most affected and to project beneficiaries (those identified as most in need of assistance). While senior managers are all too aware of the demands to be accountable to donors, they may be less proactive about implementing systematic processes to ensure downward accountability. But there's now growing pressure from donors for organisations to make downward accountability a real priority, recognising that it is crucial to achieve effective, good-quality programming.

To us, in Save the Children's Myanmar programme, 'accountability' means making sure that the children and families we work with, and for, really do have a say in every aspect of what we do – planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating. We believe that encouraging children's participation helps make us more accountable to children and their communities. We've drafted a Humanitarian Accountability Framework, which has helped staff to really understand the purpose and benefits of accountability in our emergency response.

As a child-focused organisation, it is our responsibility to support children and their families to express their views and to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their lives. As 'duty-bearers', we have a duty to respond to children and adults' concerns and problems.

Why do we need to make ourselves more accountable?

Making ourselves more accountable has a wide range of benefits – not just for children in the areas where we work, but for staff, managers, and the organisation as a whole.

We believe that improving our accountability:
- increases trust and communication between ourselves and the communities where we work
- enables us to identify problems and issues early on, and deal with them
- increases ownership of the projects among community members
- saves money, as we can really find out what materials people need most, instead of wasting funds on items that may be less useful
- improves safety and security
- improves job satisfaction (and therefore retention) among staff
- deters fraud.

In an emergency situation, where we'll be able to help some people and not others, there are clear and compelling reasons to make our response more accountable:
- *Increasing transparency* (being open about what we are doing, and why): it's important to share clear information in formats that the children and adults we're targeting can easily understand. We need to tell them about Save the Children's vision, mission, objectives and activities. People also need clear information about the criteria and/or process used for selecting (targeting) certain villages, families or individuals for assistance.
- *Reducing 'targeting' errors* (not reaching the people we want to reach): it can be very difficult to get accurate information and data in a needs assessment, especially early on. Most (if not all) of the organisations involved in the emergency response are likely to be using unreliable and outdated figures and statistics.
- *Flow of information*: there's often no 'link person' between NGOs providing emergency aid and the communities they're working in. Community leaders often don't know what an organisation's mission and values are, and have never seen any information about their plans to provide aid, including criteria for project beneficiaries, etc.

- *Mutual trust and respect*: we have to earn people's trust and respect through what we do. Communications are often difficult, especially given the urgency of an emergency response. But if we take shortcuts and don't consult children, their families, and the wider community, then we won't be able to build relationships based on mutual trust and respect. This means any future activities we plan are also less likely to succeed.

Making ourselves more accountable stimulates two-way discussion between ourselves, as duty-bearers, and the people we work for, as rights-holders. Every programme and project proposal should include cost-effective accountability mechanisms.

HAP: The seven principles of accountability

- Commitment to humanitarian standards and rights
- Setting standards and building capacity
- Communication
- Participation in programmes
- Monitoring and reporting on compliance
- Addressing complaints
- Applying these principles if and when working through implementing partners

To find out more, go to: www.hapinternational.org/projects/standard/development/principles-of-accountability.aspx

Cyclone Nargis and our emergency response

Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in May 2008. Nearly 140,000 people died – more than half of them children – and more than 2 million people were directly affected. Over the next 18 months, we helped more than 720,000 people with a $50 million programme, in what is a difficult operating environment for national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The scale of the humanitarian crisis prompted many international and local NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies to mount a large-scale response, although the government was initially reluctant to allow direct foreign assistance. At national level, civil society organisations were inexperienced in responding to humanitarian disasters. But many local organisations were motivated to respond and were actively involved in both the initial and longer-term response. Local organisations with a presence (and staff or volunteers) in cyclone-affected areas were put under considerable pressure. Most response teams involved national staff, and while capacity at the national level is strong, many local staff at township level had little or no experience of humanitarian work, or the concept of accountability.

In Myanmar, during the Nargis response, we employed around 1,300 national staff and 30 international staff across 33 country offices (see Figure 1). Apart from our emergency work, we are providing early years services for preschool children, reducing the number of children who die from preventable diseases, helping those affected by HIV and AIDS, and building up a community-based system of child protection. We work in 9 of the country's 14 states and divisions: Kayin, Mon, Shan, Ayeyarwaddy, Magway, Bago, Sagaing, Mandalay and Yangon. The Myanmar programme is a unified presence, with Save the Children UK as the lead member.

Figure 1: Map of Myanmar (Burma)

Every emergency is different. Slow-onset disasters can allow more time for assessment. But in sudden-onset emergencies, such as a cyclone or other natural disaster, collecting information about who is affected, and how, can be difficult and dangerous. Field staff and their families are often among those affected. People will often have had to flee their homes, and lack of physical access (whether for national or international staff) can be a major obstacle to assessing the level of need.

Balancing the need to act quickly with the need to be accountable

In just two months (April and May 2008), we distributed food aid to nearly half a million people. The scale of the emergency was overwhelming. Our staff worked flat out to get vital supplies to the people named on beneficiary lists. But pressure of time meant they were unable to respond to complaints from people who were not on these lists, even though some met the beneficiary criteria. There was no system in place for people to express their frustrations or concerns, or for us to give feedback. If people have no opportunity to express their views, to complain, and to give or receive feedback, food distribution can cause anger and division within a community. Donor requirements were often inflexible, and didn't allow us to update beneficiary lists frequently. There were also issues with local authorities that had to be resolved.

All of these factors led us to come up with the idea of setting up information centres. They'd provide a direct way of sharing information with children and their families and communities, and dealing with their concerns and complaints – in short, making us more accountable.

Kan Sake village, south of Pyapon, one week after Cyclone Nargis struck

The pilot projects

Information centre linked to food distributions

We ran two pilot projects: the first, from October to December 2008, involved mobile information centres linked to food distributions in the townships of Dala and Seikkyi, Yangon Division. They were run by staff with a background in monitoring and evaluation (M&E), who received technical support from the M&E Officer in the local area office. They only sought feedback about the food distributions, rather than other activities we were planning or carrying out.

How did we set up the information centre?

Many of the people affected by Cyclone Nargis needed food aid. We knew we'd have to try and reach people at different food distribution points, so we opted for a mobile information centre – a vehicle. We parked near the distribution point in each village. We put a sign on the side of the vehicle, which said: 'Anyone affected by Save the Children's programme/food distribution project can come and share their concerns here.'

We had two staff, one to stay inside so people could come and talk to them, and the other walking around, talking to people as they waited in line. Staff responded to concerns or complaints straight away if they could, but if they couldn't, they forwarded it to the appropriate person or department, letting the person who raised it know when they could expect a response. This was usually within a month, once the feedback had been analysed and shared with the relevant staff in the area office or at head office. The box below sets out some of the advantages and disadvantages (pros and cons) of setting up information centres at or near food distribution points.

Pros and cons of information centres

Pros (advantages)	Cons (disadvantages)
• Easy for people to access, don't have to make a special journey • Can reduce tensions between community and project staff, and build trust • Can talk directly to beneficiaries rather than relying on views of community leaders	• Can be crowded, as food distribution points are always busy, and tensions can be high • May not offer enough privacy for people to really say what they think • People may be reluctant to criticise if they're about to receive assistance • May not give children the chance to express their views, as children are rarely named beneficiaries on food distribution lists

What materials did we need?

The information centre is a two-way process. We wanted to share information about ourselves, as well as receiving people's feedback about what we do. We used:

- Save the Children logo/stickers
- Flipcharts (to write up beneficiary selection criteria, organogram, and other information as necessary)
- Feedback forms (or notebooks if these forms were not available).

The feedback form

Each feedback form has a unique number, so that follow-up notes can refer back to the original query or complaint. It should include the person's age, gender, location, and occupation, although in some cases, they'll need to remain anonymous and the information will need to be kept confidential. The form should also include the nature of the comment/complaint, a note of the programme/sector staff it was referred on to (if it couldn't be dealt with by staff in the information centre), and their response. If someone couldn't write, a staff member filled in the form for them.

Here's an example of the feedback form we used. It has three columns. The 'feedback' column is where you write what the person said. The 'immediate response' column is for staff at the information centre to note any initial response they gave. The 'programme response' column is where you write the response from colleagues in other sectors, if the feedback was forwarded on.

Sometimes it may be essential to get information on people's identity – for instance, if we need to follow up a serious child protection issue. Asking people to give information such as their age group, gender, and occupation can help us to identify any trends that indicate broader problems (for instance, it might show us that fishermen or people doing other kinds of work are asking for help at certain times of the year). It's also useful to know, where possible, whether the person giving us feedback is benefiting directly from our activities, and how (for instance, receiving food or other inputs). Knowing where someone lives (what part of the village) can be useful for checking information on targeting, and analysing if some problems are common to people in a certain geographical area.

Monitoring feedback

Staff in the information centre created a spreadsheet, recording the unique feedback form number, any immediate response given, actions needed, who the feedback was referred to (and when), and what response was given (and when). It may be helpful to categorise feedback by sector, and within that, whether it's a complaint, question, need, or concern. This can make it easier to direct the feedback to the right member of project staff, or the right project team.

What did we achieve?

Over the three months, we received more than 500 feedback forms (60% from women, 30% from men, and 10% from children/young people). Most concerns/complaints (70%) were dealt with by staff working in the centre, but the rest were referred to sector staff or the area office. They'd aim to respond within a month, so staff in the information centre (or even sector staff themselves) were usually able to respond to the person who'd raised the concern at the next food distribution.

Feedback form

Save the Children — **Feedback form** — ***"Right to Say and Duty to Respond"***

(No.)	(Name)	Occupation	Relationship with Head of HH	M/F	Age	Address

Feedback	Immediate response	Programme response
		Remarks

Date: ______________________ IC staff member's name: ______________________ Project staff member's name: ______________________

Village: ______________________ IC point: ______________________ Title: ______________________

Village tract: ______________________ Signature: ______________________

Other agencies thought we would mostly have people asking 'how can I get assistance for my family/community?', but most concerns were on questions like 'what is the selection criteria for beneficiaries?', or even suggestions about how we could improve projects.

Sometimes, staff had to say 'no' to people – for instance, where we don't have the capacity or funds to fulfil certain requests. While it can be difficult to say 'no', being able to explain the reasons why helps to make us more accountable and to avoid creating unrealistic expectations.

Key achievement The information centres and the complaints mechanism helped to save time, for staff in the field and in the area office, by identifying gaps in coverage, and sharing suggestions on how to improve the food distribution system. It helped us to reach more than 100 families whose needs would otherwise have been overlooked.

Information centre working with peer educators

The second pilot, from February to May 2009, involved information centres in three villages in Myaung Mya township, Ayeyarwaddy Division. They were set up in areas where we'd already created child-friendly spaces (spaces that are safe and welcoming, where children can come to play and do other activities). The peer educators also worked from these spaces.

Building on the success of the first pilot project, we set up and funded an accountability team in January 2009 (which is still in place) to work with area office teams to develop a system to capture feedback from children in a way that would really engage them. They came up with the idea of using drawing or writing cards (we've set out some of the advantages and disadvantages below).

We held a community meeting early on with children who were interested in becoming peer educators. We explained why we felt it important to share information with children and their families, and why we wanted their feedback. During these meetings, we asked children what characteristics or skills

Using drawing cards to get children's feedback

Advantages	Disadvantages
Reaches every child, with no discrimination. Encourages problem-solving, as children can express their views about how our activities affect them.	It can be difficult to correctly analyse the content of some drawings. Some pictures do not have easily identifiable objects, or may refer to problems beyond our control.
Confidential and quick. Can convey emotions and feelings.	Cost (paper and colouring pencils or pens)
Can enhance children's level of participation.	Needs peer educator with good leadership and communication skills, which may not always be available.

they thought a good peer educator should have. They then elected their peer educators. Most of those elected were already actively involved in our child protection or education activities.

The M&E Officer and other staff gave the peer educators additional training and support as necessary, so that they could fulfil their role effectively. It's crucial to help them develop the right skills and attitudes so that they can be trustworthy, positive role models for younger children. We told them what we expected from them, and what they could expect from us, including the resources (materials, etc) they would have to use in the sessions.

The peer educators held monthly sessions with children in the three villages, in groups of about 20 to 25. We split them into smaller groups: girls and boys, children under 12 and over 12, and those who were in school or out of school. The peer educators then encouraged children to draw or write on the cards, to give their views about what we do, and raise any concerns or make suggestions as to what we could improve. The team collected these cards each month, and put them in a 'postbox', which was delivered to the area office. We set up a feedback review team, who opened the postbox and discussed what actions to take.

The role of staff in the general information centres also included sharing information about Save the Children's mission, vision, plans and policies, with beneficiaries, and with partner organisations and others. Staff used child-friendly storybooks and pictures to explain Save the Children's mission, values and background, and to tell people about the different activities being implemented in their area.

Convincing children and adults to get involved

From the start, our guiding principle was that for children's participation to be meaningful, it has to be voluntary. Sessions have to be arranged in places and at times that fit in with children's other commitments. It was also vital to get support and consent from adults (especially parents, carers, and village elders) for children to participate in these sessions, and our wider activities.

What did we achieve?

The pilot project showed that children can be supported to share their views and give feedback about our activities, as well as making useful suggestions as to how we can improve. The drawing cards also enabled children to express worries or fears as a result of the emergency, which meant we could help them deal with those feelings.

Children's feedback has also proved useful for our reporting to donors, and reflects one of our key values – listening to children's voices.

Key achievement: providing training and support to peer educators – developing their communication, leadership and organisational skills – is not only an investment in individual children and young people, but also in the future of the community.

Sometimes, the drawings showed that children were still very worried or upset by what they'd experienced because of Cyclone Nargis. Staff in the child protection team were able to offer them appropriate support.

The peer educator project is strongly recommended for offices that don't have staff dedicated to M&E or accountability, as it's a direct way of finding out what children think about our work.

General information centres

The two pilots led us to develop a 'general information centre' model. We decided to set up general information centres rather than linking them to specific sector projects (such as hunger or health). In May 2009, we expanded the accountability team and rolled out the pilot, setting up information centres in 100 villages across 6 townships in Middle Island. They were run by dedicated accountability staff, with support and supervision from the M&E Officer (in the field office), and the Accountability Officer (at head office). We consulted with children right from the start. Their input proved crucial – for instance, giving their views on the proposed venue and its accessibility, and what times of day they would use it.

Telling people about the information centre

In Middle Island, the information centre team began by making a public announcement to people who had gathered at the food distribution point. We needed to explain very clearly what the centre was for. We stuck to three key messages:

- The information centre is a way of us getting your feedback about Save the Children's emergency response in your community. We welcome any questions, feedback or complaints, from men, women, girls and boys, about what we're doing – not just the food distributions, but other activities such as providing healthcare and education.
- We won't be able to answer all your questions immediately, but we will listen to what you say, and refer your concerns on to other colleagues, and let you know their response within a set period of time (usually one month).
- We can't commit to being able to take up all of your suggestions. We may be able to act on some, but not on others. But we will explain why we can't, if that's the case.

We also needed to make sure people knew what activities we were planning, and when. In this case (food distribution), the targeting criteria and beneficiary list was made available, on paper, and either announced or posted at least a week before the distribution was due to take place. This helped to avoid confusion and tension between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries.

Staffing

Every information centre has a team of five staff: one project assistant, who manages four outreach workers (who can work in teams of two). The project assistant deals with feedback collected on a day-to-day basis and makes an initial assessment about whether it needs to be referred on, and who to. He or she reports to the M&E Officer in the local area office and the Accountability Officer for that area (see section on 'Management', below). The M&E Officer can provide valuable technical support, for instance, on methods of data collection and analysis, and monitoring tools.

Ideally, staff working in the information centres should have knowledge and experience of M&E methods, guidelines and standards for accountability, and using participatory tools. They also need to have (or need support to develop) the following skills:

- Strong interpersonal skills so they can build good relationships with children and the community to gain their confidence and encourage them to give feedback about the project/s.
- Strong administrative and organisational skills, to manage the feedback forms and other systems.
- Attention to detail, as they may need to check the accuracy of certain information.
- Ability to analyse written information (feedback forms, etc)
- Respect for confidentiality (some information may be sensitive and confidential).
- Creative thinking and self-awareness: they have to use creative, encouraging methods to enable less vocal members of a group to participate. As staff may be listening to people's everyday troubles, they need to be aware of their own feelings, and able to positively deal with stress.

Management

When funding became available to expand the staff team working on accountability, we created a post of Accountability Coordinator, and three Accountability Officers (one for each geographic region, reporting to the Coordinator, who in turn reported to the Monitoring and Accountability (M&A) Manager). This was regarded as the most appropriate model, and is how it worked for most of the general information centres. The M&A Manager had to have a good knowledge of the relevant standards and guidelines for accountability, in order to train other staff in how to use them. The Accountability Coordinator played a key role in equipping other staff with the necessary skills, and familiarising them with the relevant standards and guidelines for their sector and others.

The Accountability Officers were based in head office but regularly travelled to the field and area offices to provide support. They received additional technical support from the M&E Manager, who was also based in Yangon. Their role included providing on-the-job training to project assistants and outreach workers, as well as ensuring that feedback was directed to the appropriate staff, and that responses were adequate and timely. Having themselves had training from the M&A Manager, they were able to train other staff in the area offices in how to apply the relevant standards and guidelines for accountability (see page 27).

Budgeting and reporting

For the general information centres, the Accountability Officers were responsible for managing the teams and the budget (see below). But for the food distribution pilot, as the information centre was linked to one sector, the Food Project Officer was responsible, with support from the area office M&E Officer or other staff responsible for accountability.

The Accountability Officer would submit a monthly report on the activities of the information centres in his or her area to the Regional Programme Manager, Area Managers, Accountability Coordinator, and Monitoring and Accountability Manager, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, and Project Officers in each sector. This report included an Excel file showing the status of each complaint and the response, highlighting any special achievements or difficult issues raised. The Accountability Coordinator in head office developed the methods and indicators for Accountability Officers to use.

Budgeting and resources

The cost of running 30 general information centres for one year, with support from two field-based teams (one project assistant and four outreach workers in each), was around $36,000. The budget included the following lines:

- Staffing (1 project officer, 2 project assistants and 8 outreach workers)
- Staff training
- Consultation and feedback sessions
- Travel costs (in the field)
- Per diems (staff)
- Materials, play equipment and stationery (including drawing cards, coloured pens, etc)

The cost of the drawing cards does need to be budgeted for, but they are certainly worth the benefits, as we found that children were very eager to participate.

What did we achieve?

After one year, the information centres received thousands of feedback forms. More than half were dealt with locally or by the area office, and some were referred on to the country office and even to headquarters in London. For example, one child who benefited from our education work suggested that a maths compass be included in the school kits that are distributed, as most families can't afford to buy these. Staff in the information centre forwarded this suggestion to the Education Adviser, who forwarded it to those dealing with procurement of emergency supplies at headquarters.

Key achievement: feedback from children and teachers in the Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres we support pointed out the dangers of children sleeping without mosquito nets. While the programme distributed mosquito nets to beneficiary households, for children to use at night, we had not provided nets for ECCD centres, where the timetable includes an afternoon nap for the children. After the information centre staff shared this feedback at an office meeting, the health and education team agreed to distribute nets to the ECCD centres too.

Getting people's feedback through the information centres has proved valuable to project staff, as they've been able to make small but significant improvements to strengthen implementation and, ultimately, the impact of our activities. And as an organisation, we've been able to learn lessons that can inform our future activities.

We're continually trying to strengthen the ways we get feedback, doing so in ways that maximise children and young people's opportunities to participate. We realised that the general information centres were most popular with children aged 7 to 13. So we're now looking at ways to reach younger children and adolescents, particularly those young people who work full-time.

We've also developed more creative ways of telling children and young people who we are and what we do. Children have come up with their own songs and games about Save the Children's history and what we do in their area. And they've devised and performed dramas about the role of the information centres in their communities.

We also published and translated a child-friendly storybook about Save the Children's history and activities.

Key achievement: in one village, someone had expressed that they were worried about water shortages during the coming dry season. The information centre team referred the concern to the WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) team to respond. The WASH team advised the information centre of their plans for distributing drinking water, and the information centre team organised a public announcement (see page 20).

Public announcement from Save the Children Information Centre, Village in Middle Island

17 March 2009 (translated from the original)

Last month, we received information (feedback) from you regarding the water shortage problem in the coming dry season. We, Save the Children, are going to cope with the community encountering water shortages in summer. We plan to distribute drinking water to every household in your village. The distributions will start from the third week of March. We will distribute 3 litres per person, for the purpose of drinking only, which is about equal to 3 bottles of Alpine purified drinking water. For the coming rainy season, we are going to build a rainwater collection tank in each village. Depending on the condition of the village, we will consider providing two if necessary.

Managing expectations and 'saying goodbye'

We need to tell people, right from the start, how long the information centre will run for, and how they can contact us after it closes. All those involved in the project, including beneficiaries, staff, partner organisations and local authorities, should know what is happening at each stage, and why. Remember that it's important to report back to the community about what we've achieved through our projects, and what we've learned.

You can find more guidance on 'How to say goodbye' in *Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide* (www.ecbproject.org/page/41 Section 6, Tool 14).

Children's drama performance in Zeen Taung village

Key considerations

Staffing and management

In the two pilot projects, staff from sector or project teams were seconded to the information centres, and were managed by the relevant project officers, with technical support from the M&E Officer. When funding became available to expand the accountability team, in May 2009, we recruited dedicated staff. While this enabled us to get new information centres up and running quickly, it also raises questions about their longer-term sustainability. What happens when funding is no longer available? How, as an organisation, do we raise funds to support mechanisms to improve accountability of our emergency response?

Another issue is that managers need to carefully manage relationships between staff working in the information centres and other project staff, so that the former are not perceived as 'spying' on the latter. All staff need a good understanding of the role of the information centre and its staff, as well as how they can work together effectively.

Consulting staff, the local community, children, and civil society groups

Consulting staff

One of the best ways to come up with practical ideas on how to set up an effective information centre is to first consult with staff who know the community and area well. Explain how the information centre will be set up and run, and give them a chance to make suggestions. Use this opportunity to clear up any confusion about the role of the centre (for instance, it's not a way of evaluating the performance of staff or specific projects).

It's important to discuss the benefits the information centre can bring (see page 3) in terms of greater impact, greater community involvement and ownership, and greater job satisfaction.

Consulting the community

Your first priority should be to involve children and adults at every stage of the process. The first meeting with members of the local community can also be used as an opportunity to get some feedback.

Organise a meeting with adults from within the community – local officials, religious elders, parents, caregivers and teachers. First, ask if they want an information centre in their village. If the answer is yes, ask how they'd like to receive information from us and how they'd like to give us their views. Include both women and men, and people from different age groups. You may need to do this on separate occasions (for instance, if women don't feel able to speak openly about issues in front of men).

Ask people where they'd like the information centre to be situated, and what opening hours they think would be best. Encourage people to be open in sharing their views and comments about what we do – there's no right or wrong feedback. Discuss issues around confidentiality, explaining that people can remain anonymous if they'd prefer, but that in certain cases (eg, if there is a serious child protection concern that needs to be investigated), the identity of some individuals will need to be established.

You should always inform the community that Save the Children has specific policies for child protection and a staff code of conduct, and make sure they know the appropriate channels for reporting any concerns or violations.

Consulting children

Consulting with children – at all stages of the project cycle – is one of the ways we fulfil the standard for children's participation. It's also the only real way to know what children think about what we're doing. Ask children how they'd like to give us their views and suggestions, and how they'd like to receive information from us (colourful leaflets, cartoon booklets, posters, notice boards, verbal announcements, or other ways). These consultations should directly inform how the information centre is set up and run.

Games and other creative activities are a good way of building trust with children and encouraging them to express their thoughts and participate meaningfully (see 'Using participatory tools' on page 24). You can use these before, during and after a consultation. It's also important to recognise that children will have different views depending on their age, sex, and other factors (such as whether they go to school). For instance, schoolchildren might say they'd like the information centre to be set up in their school grounds, but this would exclude children who don't go to school, who may not find it such a welcoming place. So you should give careful thought about where to situate the centre, taking into account the needs of all children in the community, especially those who are most disadvantaged.

Finally, remember to choose a place to meet that children will find welcoming, and a time that doesn't take them away from their other commitments at school or in the home.

Consulting civil society groups

Whenever an emergency strikes, local communities already have their own structures and capacities to tackle some of the problems. In most villages, there will be community-based or faith-based organisations or groups such as churches, schools, traditional leaders, and local government officials. However, some may be more active than others. International organisations should always seek to consult local community groups as part of their emergency response, ultimately aiming to strengthen their capacity.

Information centre staff need a good awareness of the role of local civil society organisations and groups. We began by doing a 'civil society mapping' with other project staff in the field office, looking at what civil society groups existed at village and township levels. We prepared an agenda for a community consultation workshop, which involved sharing information about our planned activities (or those already underway) in the area. It also covered how the feedback mechanism would work. The outcome of the community consultations should always be recorded and taken into account, along with the results of consultations with staff and children.

Using participatory tools

We used a number of tools to help children to identify, prioritise, and analyse issues affecting them, especially issues relating to our activities. We also helped them to draw up action plans, and get involved in monitoring our activities. The table below describes some of the tools we used.

Tools we used to encourage children's participation

	Example of participatory tool	Other possible tools
Identify	Body mapping (as a way of finding out children's likes and dislikes)	Drawing, drama, role-plays, puppetry, risk mapping, 'a day in our life', focus group discussions, transect walk (through a village, to learn about community life), picture cards, value line discussions to explore different points of view
Prioritise	Dot voting (using different colours for girls and boys, and different age groups)	Diamond ranking, matrix ranking, movement voting, pots and beans…
Analyse	Problem tree analysis (identifying the root causes and impact of a problem)	Why? Why? Why? SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats)
Action planning	How? How? How?	Visioning and action planning, detailing *who* will do something, *when*, *where*, *what* they'll do, and *how* they'll do it.
Monitoring	'H' assessment (encouraging children to explore strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions)	Timeline (achievements and challenges), 'before and after' body map, pots and beans, circle analysis (exploring issues around inclusion and exclusion)…

For more information on participatory tools, *see* Action for the Rights of Children (ARC)'s *Resource Pack*, Foundation module 4, on 'Participation and inclusion'. It's available at: www.savethechildren.net/arc/foundation/participationinclusion.html

See also Feinstein C and O'Kane C (2008), *Kit of Tools for Participatory Research and Evaluation with Children, Young People and Adults*, Save the Children Norway. It's available at: www.reddbarna.no

Noticeboard

Information centre staff used a noticeboard to help people visualise the role of the centre, and how they can give and receive feedback. It allowed us to share standardised information about our organisation and what we're doing to improve our accountability. This means we can meet the minimum standard as set out in The Good Enough Guide (Section 6, Tool 1).

When we organised a meeting with representatives of a community, the noticeboard we laid out showed seven different areas:

- *Organisational background* (who we are, and what we do): our mission, values, background, the staff code of conduct, and what other parts of the organisation do.
- *Humanitarian plan*: what projects we're carrying out in the country, and where, and key problems we're addressing.
- *Progress reports*: what we've done, how many people have benefited, and how we monitor and evaluate our activities, and report back to people.
- *Humanitarian Accountability Framework*: including any strengths and weaknesses we've identified, the action plans we've drawn up to address them, and how the community can take part.
- *Complaint response mechanism*: feedback channels (where feedback goes, and how it's dealt with), the timeframe involved, and how we use feedback to improve what we do, across the organisation.
- *Beneficiary selection criteria*: people are entitled to know how the criteria were decided, and by whom.
- *Information centre*: how it will work, its role, etc.

Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions, where you invite a group of 6 to 12 people to discuss something in detail, can be a very effective way of listening to a range of voices from within a community. You'll need someone to facilitate the discussion, who can make sure that all participants are encouraged to contribute. And someone to take notes, as you'll need to record any suggestions people make.

For guidelines on how to conduct a focus group discussion, see *The Good Enough Guide* at: www.ecbproject.org/page/41 (Section 6, Tool 6).

Child-led drama

Children from villages in four of the townships where we'd set up information centres (Kyauktan, Pyarpon, Thingangone and Deedugone) created their own play about the information centre, which they performed to different audiences. Staff helped with script writing and composing songs.

Child-led drama has a number of strengths: it's an engaging, visual and vocal way of telling people about Save the Children, and what we're doing in an area, as well as asking for feedback. But not all children will want to get involved, and many prefer other forms of creative expression, including puppetry, poetry, dancing, singing or rapping. Staff should support the different creative ideas children have.

Helping staff and partners to become more accountable

As well as improving our own accountability, we're committed to promoting greater accountability among our partners and other organisations. People need to understand new concepts before they're able to apply them in their everyday work. So the first step in building capacity is often to provide training and support for project staff, managers and partner organisations to help them fulfil their accountability responsibilities.

In Myanmar, as in many other countries and cultural contexts, the concept of accountability is still relatively new – particularly the idea that 'beneficiaries' should be able to hold aid agencies to account for what they do. This means there is no ready pool of staff experienced in accountability processes and programming. In fact, before Cyclone Nargis, there were only a few local and national NGOs involved in humanitarian work. Few of them had paid staff, and they had had little opportunity for organisational development. They had no codes of conduct, no stated mission or vision, and few formal procedures in place.

With our support, technical consultants from Sphere and the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) came to the country in July 2008. They trained staff from member organisations to train others, including local NGOs, coordinated by the Local Resource Centre (LRC). (The LRC built on a previous project, the Capacity Building Initiative.) The LRC provided training for local, national and international NGOs in financial management, organisational development, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation.

We were also able to call on expertise of other organisations or networks, including: Mango (Management Accounting for Non-Governmental Organisations); the 'Do No Harm' principles (so that activities do not increase the burden on an already overstretched community); ALNAP (the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action); and People in Aid (guidance on how to recruit staff).

Meeting standards for quality and accountability

There's already a lot of good practice we can learn from when it comes to making our emergency response more accountable to children and adults in the communities we're working with. Here are some of the key guidelines and resources.

1. The Sphere Handbook

Humanitarian Charter and *Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*

The Sphere Project is an initiative to define and uphold the standards by which the global community responds to the plight of people affected by disasters, principally through a set of guidelines (commonly known as the Sphere Handbook).

www.sphereproject.org/

2. HAP

The *HAP 2007 Standard in Humanitarian Accountability and Quality Management* includes six benchmarks: humanitarian quality management, transparency, participation, staff competencies, handling complaints, and continual improvement.

HAP International was set up in 2003, and is the humanitarian sector's first international self-regulatory body. Its members are committed to meeting the highest standards of accountability and quality management.

www.hapinternational.org/

3. The Emergency Capacity Building Project

Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide

This offers a set of basic guidelines on how to be accountable to local people and how to measure the impact of activities in emergency situations. It includes tools for needs assessment and profiling. It's aimed at humanitarian practitioners, project officers and managers with some experience in the field.

www.ecbproject.org/page/41

4. Save the Children

Practice Standards in Children's Participation

The Practice Standards provide guidance on a range of issues, including an ethical approach to children's participation, incorporating child protection concerns into participatory practice, creating child-friendly environments for participation, and the importance of follow-up and evaluation. They were developed based on feedback and consultations with staff, partner organisations and children in various countries and community settings.

www.savethechildren.org.uk/en/54_3169.htm

5. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief

This voluntary code of conduct was developed and agreed upon by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in 1994. It's based on 10 points of principle that all humanitarian actors should adhere to in their disaster response work.

www.ifrc.org/publicat/conduct

Save the Children staff making a public announcement about food distribution in Deedugone area, March 2009

How did we do? Findings of our accountability self-assessment

In July 2009, one year on from our response to Cyclone Nargis, we carried out a self-assessment to get a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the accountability mechanisms we'd set up as part of our emergency response. The aim was to look at how effective the processes were, and make recommendations to further develop our Humanitarian Accountability Framework. We also want to share the lessons learned with other programmes.

First, we describe how we carried out the self-assessment, and then we set out the lessons learned from our response to Cyclone Nargis in relation to the six benchmarks of the HAP Principles of Accountability.

How we did the self-assessment (the methodology)

- We developed two questionnaires for one-to-one interviews, one for members of the local community, and one for staff. The questions were aimed at identifying strengths and gaps in how we, and our partners, understand and apply the six HAP benchmarks.
- The self-assessment was carried out in three places: two field offices (Pyapon and Kungyangone), and in the head office in Yangon.
- In each field office location, we collected data from three communities. We used individual interviews (with a volunteer, a villager, and a committee member), and focus group discussions (one group of adults, one group of children).
- At the two area offices, we carried out focus group discussions with project staff and support staff, and three interviews with individuals (Project Officer, Project Assistant, and Outreach Worker).

- At head office in Yangon, we did one-to-one interviews with two members of the senior management team, and two focus group discussions (one with support staff, one with programme staff).

We should first note one major limitation of the methodology. The villages where we carried out interviews and focus group discussions were selected by staff from the area office, and thus tended to be 'showcase' villages. As a result, responses from the community tended to be more positive than negative.

Benchmark 1: Humanitarian quality management system

The benchmark requires that the agency has in place a designated set of processes that enable continual improvement in their performance in meeting the essential needs of people who have survived the disaster, and respecting their dignity.

In Myanmar, we set up our Humanitarian Accountability Framework to ensure that our management systems are robust, and deliver a high-quality humanitarian response that puts the most vulnerable children and adults at the centre of what we do.

How did we do?

While most staff involved were aware of Save the Children's mission, values, policies and codes of conduct, few staff were familiar with the concept of accountability in humanitarian work, as well as the relevant standards and guidelines (Sphere Project's Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, the Good Enough Guide, etc).

Benchmark 2: Transparency

The benchmark requires that the agency makes the following information publicly available to intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff and others:

- organisational background
- humanitarian accountability framework

- humanitarian plan
- progress reports
- complaints handling procedures.

How did we do?

While members of the communities we worked with knew that we are a child-focused agency, and generally knew which activities we were carrying out, they were not well informed about Save the Children's mission, our wider organisational structure, or how to give feedback (this was before we set up the information centres). Interestingly, children tended to know more about us than adults who had just heard information in public meetings. Committee members wanted to know more about our staff code of conduct, and how to make complaints.

Some staff didn't fully understand that beneficiaries have a right to certain information, and regarded sharing information as something they did 'when they had time'. We need to produce clear information about our mission, our history, our aims and activities, in formats that children and adults with low levels of literacy can easily understand. It's also vital that each sector (education, health, hunger, child survival, etc) shares information with the community, ideally before activities begin, about how beneficiaries are selected (the criteria used), so that people have a genuine opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns at this stage. The information centres played a key role in sharing information about Save the Children with the communities where we were carrying out activities, and in receiving and responding to feedback.

We also identified that staff need ongoing training and support to develop the necessary skills to provide a good-quality humanitarian response. The key to this is developing people's skills in facilitation, negotiation, conflict-resolution and participation.

Benchmark 3: Community participation

The benchmark requires that the agency enables beneficiaries and their representatives to participate in programme decisions, and seeks their informed consent.

We've tried to involve beneficiaries, both children and adults, at all stages of our programming, making special efforts to involve the most vulnerable children and adults.

How did we do?

While some projects secured good participation from children and other members of the community in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation stages, there was little involvement in the project planning and design stage. One of the biggest constraints to people's meaningful participation is the time that children and adults can devote to getting involved, bearing in mind their family and school/work commitments. While staff and some members of the community appreciate the value of meaningful participation, staff need greater support and training in how to enable children to participate, and how to ensure that children and adults are consulted in the initial project planning and design stage.

Benchmark 4: Staff competencies

The benchmark requires that the agency determine the competencies, attitudes and development needs of staff required to implement its humanitarian quality management system.

How did we do?

Feedback from community members (both children and adults) about staff was generally positive, saying that staff were polite, friendly, patient, and had a good attitude towards the community and their work. Staff had individual 'learning and development plans', and there was a performance management system in place, but there was not enough information or transparency from Human Resources (HR) about how the evaluation of staff performance was assessed and used.

We therefore recommend a review of the performance management system, to include a self-assessment component. Managers also require additional training to use the performance management and evaluation system in a professional manner.

Staff also requested more technical support and training on how to apply key quality standards for humanitarian work, including the Sphere Project, HAP and *The Good Enough Guide*.

Benchmark 5: Complaints handling

The benchmark requires the agency to establish complaints-handling procedures that are effective, accessible and safe for intended beneficiaries, disaster-affected communities, agency staff, and partner organisations.

How did we do?

People sometimes gave feedback directly to staff in the field. But many people seemed reluctant to raise concerns or make complaints, and had little awareness of their right to do so. This perhaps reflects a broader issue, linked to cultural values and the traditional 'donor-recipient' aid relationship, whereby it would be 'inappropriate' to complain when people are trying to help.

While people may not raise complaints directly, and verbally, staff can sometimes tell if people within the community are unhappy about something by their behaviour. People were also unsure about procedures to deal with and respond to complaints. Some also felt that senior staff should handle complaints, rather than Project Assistants and Outreach Workers.

The organisation (ie, HR, Regional Programme Managers, Accountability team, Area Managers, and Project Officers) should develop a systematic and practical complaints handling procedure in all area offices, that takes into account the community's preferred way of providing feedback, and that is easily accessible to children and adults in the community.

It's vital that staff receive training and support to enable them to deal with feedback and complaints effectively, and that information centre staff in particular are aware of the importance of maintaining confidentiality.

Benchmark 6: Continual improvement

The benchmark requires that the agency establish a process of continual improvement for its humanitarian accountability framework and humanitarian quality management system.

How did we do?

The senior management team are continuing to develop the Humanitarian Accountability Framework. This framework should include training and ongoing support for all programme staff to help them to understand the concept of accountability in our humanitarian response, and integrate it into all stages of the project cycle. Staff at all levels of the organisation need to be engaged with the framework to maximise its impact.

The self-assessment brought out many issues. Staff feel that senior managers should place more emphasis on management of the agency as a whole, rather than focusing on managing individual staff roles, in order to achieve our strategic mission in Myanmar. For instance, the organisation provides an e-learning platform, but many field staff do not have computers or internet access, so can't benefit from this. Field staff often felt frustrated by frequent policy changes that come from headquarters or the country office, which took up a great deal of their time. Some field staff also felt that short-term projects (six months or so) were problematic because staff started looking for other jobs after three or four months, often leaving the team short at the crucial stage of implementation – which inevitably affects the quality of our activities.

Finally, accountability mechanisms need to be included in all project proposals and budget, and external evaluations should assess how effective those mechanisms are.

Appendix 1: Staff responsibilities

Within the information centres, the key responsibilities of staff are as follows:

Project Assistant

- Organise meetings to consult with the community, children and adults; set up appropriate systems of gathering information about people's views and concerns, and find ways of feeding back information that are accessible to children and adults.
- Prepare monthly workplans and expenditure forecasts together with the M&E Officer, the Area Project Coordinators, and the Area Manager.
- Work closely with project staff to ensure that systems are in place to involve project beneficiaries at all stages of the project cycle, from research and planning, to impact assessment and evaluation.
- Monitor and document the progress of programme or project activities against agreed accountability indicators in order to inform and improve overall programme strategy.

Outreach Worker

- Set up information centres in each community, after consulting with children and adults to find the most appropriate place and time for the centre to open.
- Share information about who we are and what we do in the area or country (ie, our mission, values, and other key policies and plans, such as staff code of conduct, child protection policy, etc)
- Facilitate all members of the community – including the most disadvantaged children and adults – to give their views and raise any concerns or complaints about our work.
- Record people's views and concerns or complaints accurately in the feedback form.

Accountability Officer

- Provide on-the-job training and support to the Project Assistant and Outreach Workers in the information centre to ensure its smooth running.
- Ensure that information and feedback from the community is directed to the appropriate channels, and that adequate responses are given to the community in a timely manner.
- Provide training for area office staff in how to apply the relevant standards and guidelines for accountability at all levels and stages of our emergency response.
- Work with the M&E Officer at township level and the Area Project Coordinator to provide monthly feedback to staff regarding responses to community concerns and complaints.
- Translate and analyse information gathered through the complaint response mechanism, and follow up any actions needed at head office level.

Accountability Coordinator

This is not a broad account of the responsibilities of this post, but it covers some of the essentials to deliver key accountability functions:

Accountability: ensure and support setting up and implementation of relevant systems, integrating them with other existing management and monitoring initiatives. Ensure that accountability indicators and standards are integrated into plans and operations of all project/programme teams.

Developing staff capacity: provide support and training for other staff, at all levels of the organisation, to improve their understanding of the concept of accountability, and how to apply it in their day-to-day work. Lead and support staff to use participatory methods throughout the project cycle, to ensure that children's voices are heard and their participation is meaningful. Encourage staff and management to engage in downward accountability, putting the most vulnerable children and adults in the communities where we work at the centre of what we do.

Internal coordination: provide technical support for the information centre teams, and liaise with funding teams and sector programmes to include an accountability mechanism in every proposal. Communicate with head office and regional office counterparts to facilitate key monitoring and accountability events.

External accountability: represent Save the Children at meetings or events with other organisations, including at international events. Facilitate or undertake training to promote greater accountability among partners and other NGOs working in Myanmar, in liaison with technical staff from other members of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) in country.

Appendix 2:
Budget for running 30 general information centres for one year

	Cost for 12 months ($)	Total	Comment
Staffing			
1 Project Officer	1 x $461 x 12	$5,532	
2 Project Assistant	2 x $233 x 12	$2,796	
8 Outreach Workers	8 x $93 x 12	$8,928	
Staff training	$1,500	$1,500	
Consultation and feedback sessions	30 villages x $400	$12,000	
Travel costs (in field)	$200 x 12 x 2 teams	$4,800	
Per diems (staff)	$40 x 10 x 12	$4,800	
Information, education and communications (IEC) materials and stationery	$1,500	$1,500	
TOTAL		$36,856	

Accountability Matters in Emergencies

Listening to children and responding to their feedback during Save the Children's humanitarian response in Myanmar (Burma)

- How can we make ourselves more accountable to the children and communities we work with and for?
- How can we maximise the quality and impact of what we do when we respond to humanitarian disasters?
- What tools work well in different situations and in different cultural contexts?

This case study shares our experience of setting up information centres in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis struck in May 2008. We describe what we achieved, how we did it, and the lessons we learned.

We hope it inspires others to find the best ways of improving their accountability to children and their communities, whatever the context.

Save the Children