Introducing CUIDAR: A child-centred approach to disasters

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‘I think they should give more opportunity to the young people’s opinions, because although they think we are immature and that we are going to say outlandish things, it is a lie, there are many young people that are very mature.’ (Young participant following an event with policy-makers, Portugal)

The role, visibility and activism of young people in the context of disaster has grown exponentially since 2018. As we were drafting this book, the young activist Greta Thunberg was receiving a human rights award from Amnesty International as an ‘Ambassador of Conscience’, joining previous recipients Malala Yousafzai and Nelson Mandela (BBC, 2019). On Twitter, using the hashtag #FridaysForFuture denoting the global school strike movement, Greta declared: ‘This is not my award, this is everyone’s award and would not have been possible without everyone striking every Friday because of the climate crisis.’

Fridays For Future, School Strike for Climate, Juventud por el Clima (there are different names) was in turn inspired by the youth-led strikes in Parkland School in Florida, a protest against the US gun laws that young people said enabled a massacre on their campus on 14 February 2018. The following month, a national school walkout took place together with the US-wide March for Our Lives rally against gun violence. That summer, Greta Thunberg began to sit in protest outside the Swedish Parliament, and we have since seen a transformation, led by young people, in our understanding of what counts as a disaster and who gets to say what must be done. Climate change has been recast as a ‘climate crisis’, and young people, through coordinated worldwide, popular and peaceful protests, have both inspired adults to protest and act and motivated politicians who now queue up to acknowledge the crisis as a disaster and, in some cases, to promise radical changes in policy and practice. The inspiring, transformative and mobilising capacity of this young people’s movement can be seen in some of its
slogans: ‘There’s no planet B’, ‘My future matters’, ‘Why aren’t you panicking?’, ‘If you don’t act like adults then we will’, ‘Our house is on fire’, ‘We haven’t known a world without climate change’, ‘System change not climate change’.

The CUIDAR project began as a response to a timely call by the European Commission’s Secure Societies theme within its Horizon 2020 programme for culturally sensitive disaster management plans. So we argued that children and young people should be considered as a cultural group whose perspectives and insights were overlooked in the adultist cultural worlds of emergency planning and disaster risk management (DRM). This was a risky step, perhaps – clearly there are many ‘cultures’ and ‘subcultures’ among ‘children and young people’, just as there are in societies at large. Although perhaps a risky concept to use, culture allowed us to shift the strong ‘naturalist’ narrative that exists around disasters and that is used in the field of DRM. Employing the phrase ‘cultures of disaster resilience…’ allowed us to speak of disasters as comprising troubling entanglements of nature and culture, and of a variety of logics and ways of understanding and making sense of disasters. And ‘cultures of disaster resilience’ also allowed us to denaturalise another important concept, ‘resilience’, and view this in its social context (about which more below).

Following a staged approach, CUIDAR researchers began with a Scoping Review of policies, practices and programmes relating to children’s involvement in disaster management in each partner country and of the published literature. The next step, Dialogues with Children, was to explore children’s perceptions and experiences of disaster and then to use what we learned to build a series of practical encounters, or Mutual Learning Exercises (MLEs), between them and decision-makers. To gain the most from our interactions with children, young people and decision-makers, the stages of the project were designed to follow a path in which each encounter would build on the next, and scale up through local, regional and National Policy Debates, through international networks, gathering pace as we went towards production of a Child-Centred Disaster Risk Management Framework.

This rather ordered and linear progression (expressed in Figure 0.2), while helpful organisationally, did present some challenges. Lived realities have a habit of intervening, and during the funded lifetime of the CUIDAR project 2015–18, Europe saw major disasters. The 2016 earthquakes in Central Italy resulted in heavy loss of life in and around Amatrice, the traumatic and lethal Grenfell Tower fire in West London, the devastating forest fires in Portugal in 2017 and the shocking wildfires in Mati near Athens in 2018 would be to
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Two of the cities we worked in for CUIDAR, Manchester and Barcelona, were hit by terrorist attacks in 2017. Any book about participation in disaster management runs the risk of being overtaken by, or seeming to ignore, events, and as we were finalising our manuscript the world was gripped by a global disease pandemic in the form of COVID-19. While a pandemic disaster has long been foreseen by emergency planners, societies seem ill prepared, uncertain and struggling for the necessary capacity to respond. The challenge, once again, is how to articulate a response capable of dealing with the emergency, which is at the same time inclusive and respectful of diversity. Again, the challenge is to learn from previous disasters and not leave anyone behind, for example, being able to acknowledge and incorporate the rights, voices and crucial contributions of children and young people in the management of this pandemic. We have seen some examples of campaigns to promote social bonds and reduce social isolation during the pandemic, giving support and care to parents, family, friends and neighbours, such as the ‘Estimat Diari’ (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2020) initiative from Barcelona City Council, through which children and young people were encouraged to use the ‘Dear Diary’ platform to express their thoughts and feelings about life during COVID-19, and became involved with civic life from their homes by sending messages to the Mayor, who made a weekly response via YouTube and IGTV.

But while some highly visible disasters have been happening, less visible and slow onset disasters continue to take place. These include the climate breakdowns that create refugees and mass migrations across Europe, or the persistent growth in austerity-related poverty and inequality manifested by the number of families accessing foodbanks or losing their homes. Working on the CUIDAR project, it was

Figure 0.2: CUIDAR project stages

- Scoping Review
- Dialogues with Children
- Mutual Learning Exercises
- National Policy Debates
- Child-Centred Disaster Risk Management Framework
sometimes a challenge for us to ‘stick to the plan’: we debated as a
group whether to follow particular disasters as they unfolded in our
countries, to try to find out how children and young people were
affected and coping. But this would probably have been a mistake,
because we would have been reacting to events, whereas our aims
were proactive, to draw out through creative methods children’s *existing*
knowledges. We wanted to work with children’s own definitions and
identifications of disaster in order to make visible how young people
could play a role as actors and citizens, rather than as victims. It was
important to show how children’s particular insights and experiences
– sometimes of recent disasters, such as floods in the UK and previous
earthquakes in Spain and Italy – or indeed of living with ongoing
everyday risk, could help develop better plans and processes for DRM
over the longer term.

‘CUIDAR has made me see from another point of view
how to tackle emergency planning in our institution.’
(Deputy Director of Civil Protection, Catalonia, Spain,
2017)

**The CUIDAR researchers**

Five teams of researchers and practitioners came together to enact the
project stages, contributing diverse skills and experience but with a
common goal: participatory working. The CUIDAR coordinators
from Lancaster, UK, drew on participatory work carried out since
2007 with children who suffered severe flooding in the UK 2013/14
floods in collaboration with Save the Children UK (Mort et al, 2018a).
The insights gained and demands made by children living with flood
risk on the Humber Estuary and Thames Valley inspired ideas about
taking this approach into a European context. Accordingly, Save the
Children UK contacted their colleagues at Save the Children Italy
who were at the time forging relationships with Italian municipalities
and civil protection authorities to have children’s needs recognised
in disaster management. The Spanish team was already exploring
alternative views of disasters from an ethics of care perspective,
engaging and thinking with undervalued and marginalised voices,
geographies and temporalities in disasters. The Portuguese researchers
had previous interests in climate change and environmental risk, and
the Greek practitioners were to contribute their experience in special
education and working with children with specific disabilities. It was
important that any outcomes or recommendations from CUIDAR
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would include the voices of disabled children and young people from diverse backgrounds.

Some key terms used in this book

**Participation and citizenship**

Participation, like disasters, happens in places, and is shaped by the conditions of possibility in those places. As we found in our attempts to bring together decision-makers and children, these conditions include located experiences of inclusion/exclusion, not to mention ability/disability, gender, ethnicity and multiple forms of social diversity. But while participation is localised, it is also a set of ideas, theories and aspirations. Sherry Arnstein’s hugely influential ‘Ladder of Citizen Participation’ (1969) offered a form of linear critique, from ‘manipulation’ to ‘citizen control’. These ideas were later developed and applied to the position of young people by Roger Hart (1992) in his ladder: *Children’s Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship* (see Figure 0.3). Hart’s ladder understands children’s participation as a process in which young people are either informed, consulted or have the opportunity to become actively involved in, or even share, decision-making with adults. There are up to eight degrees of participation, although the last three (where children are tokenised, decorative or manipulated) are considered non-participation. At the top, we find projects or programmes that are initiated by children and young people, and in which adults share decision-making with younger people (rung 8) or play a supportive role (rung 7), or projects that, like CUIDAR, are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with young people (rung 6).

Save the Children has used Hart’s ladder in much of its work. As researchers we were, however, aware of critiques and developments of this approach, as Chapter 1 explores. Aware of the tensions between theory and practice in participation, we realised the importance of working with local and cultural specificities, but then to push a bit further, to find ways to join with young people to widen their opportunities for entry into the expert, adultist framing of disaster risk management:

‘We met the Civil Protection Volunteers. We had our map that we made during the project, and we showed them the important places for us: where we meet with our friends, to the schools, and to the places where there are landslides or risk of floods.’ (Federica, 11 years old, Genoa, Italy)
Figure 0.3: Hart’s ladder of participation

Note: Eight levels of young people’s participation in projects (the ladder metaphor is borrowed from the well-known essay on adult participation by Arnstein (1969); the categories are new)

Source: UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti
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Working in those spaces we came to realise how the practices of participation became expressions of children’s citizenship, long underestimated and occluded by established systems of governance. Thinking about citizenship practices then took us back to our initial discussions about Article 12 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (OHCHR, 1989), with its formal expression of rights:

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child provides:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

So, there was an important task for us here, to work on the mutual enhancement of theory and practice in children’s participation in the context of disaster risk management. Here, of course, there is an important link with the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction Sendai Framework, which explicitly calls for recognition of children as strategic actors with the right to participate:

Children and youth are agents of change and should be given the space and modalities to contribute to disaster risk reduction, in accordance with legislation, national practice and educational curricula. (UNDRR, 2015)

This links strongly with our second step in enacting CUIDAR: having asked young people to frame and tell us what disaster meant for them, we asked them, and then in sensitisation meetings, our governmental and practitioner participants, whether they were aware of UNCRC, in particular Article 12, and also of children’s inclusion in the Sendai Framework. It turned out that awareness of these was extremely low. However, rather than this being a depressing and undermining moment, for us it helped open the door to our project: it gave children the confidence to speak and articulate their experience, and
interestingly, it gave adults ‘permission’ within organisations to spend time listening to children. In this way CUIDAR was performative, often literally, as a range of creative and theatre-based approaches was seen to foster children’s articulation and adult listening:

‘I enjoyed this activity [writing a manifesto for the National Policy Debate] because the adults involved were very direct talking to us. They didn’t treat us just as children, but also as experts.’ (Michela, 16 years old, Ancona, Italy)

**Children and young people as a cultural group**

What is it like to be a child living in a risky place today, and how can we find out about this? To what extent have old or traditional meanings of child/children shaped current attitudes to children’s participation, particularly in DRM in European and Western contexts? The term *infant*, apart from referring to a child’s earliest years, etymologically means ‘one who does not or cannot speak’, from the Latin *infans*. The Greek etymology from *pais* implies one who is (to be) educated, moulded to become an ideal member of the ‘polis’ or state. One of CUIDAR’s challenges was therefore to contribute to changing these voiceless, rather passive meanings and status. This implied caring for, and about, children’s insights and experiences and sensitising adults to enable them to listen to young people and then find ways to act on what they heard (Mort et al, 2018a).

Positioning children and young people as a cultural group was a way to enable them to have a seat at the table in the terms of the European Commission’s Secure Societies programme (EC, nd), which had called for research into culturally sensitive disaster management plans. Taking a cultural approach therefore allowed us to regard children as more than a mere socio-demographic category. The focus on culture allowed us to speak of childhood as a socio-historical construction, which varies within contexts and settings. Furthermore, it was a way to speak of children and young people as forming ‘subcultural’ groups (Brake, 1985), whose ideas, beliefs and interests are sometimes at odds with those of the wider cultures in which they find themselves. It was a way, therefore, to speak of power, identity, visibility, voice, agency and rights in a DRM context. To their credit the European Commission peer reviewers and decision-makers must have agreed, to the extent that CUIDAR could be funded and enacted.

We worked with two versions of ‘culture’. First, we regard children themselves as a cultural group by virtue of being disenfranchised from
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emergency planning matters, which in turn gives them a particular perspective on disaster. Second, ‘childhood’ itself is often universalised, yet of course, children embody all the cultural differences and diversity found in society as a whole.

Disasters, risk management and risk reduction

Interestingly, we were criticised by European Commission monitors part way through the CUIDAR project for not starting out with a clear definition of ‘disaster’. This challenge made us reassess and then renew our fundamental position: that children themselves would identify what counted as disaster for them.

Disaster is increasingly being understood as an outcome of social vulnerability and inequality, a product of human neglect or unbridled growth such as building on flood plains or too close to forests, neglecting safeguards for the sake of profit. Disaster can even become a site for the advance of profiteering (Klein, 2007). Because the poorest neighbourhoods and communities are the most likely to suffer the severest consequences of a natural hazard, this turns a hazard into a disaster. This does not mean that disasters are purely social events, but they certainly aren’t natural (Guggenheim, 2014). The movement #NoNaturalDisasters comprises a group of academics and practitioners dedicated to shifting the prevailing language used in general discourse and media reporting around the use of ‘natural’, which, they argue, ‘strips disaster stories of their social, political, environmental and economic context – one where injustice is pervasive’ (Blanchard, 2018; No Natural Disasters, nd).

Social scientific research has shown over many years that disaster is not a thing or event, but a process – usually slower and longer than commonly perceived (Knowles, 2014), certainly messier and more complex than the traditional emergency planning cycle of mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery implies, and as critiqued by Easthope and Mort (2014). Our work, then, joins calls to question what counts as a disaster: when, how and for whom (with an emphasis on children and young people) a disaster comes into being. Definitions of disaster evolve in response to prevailing conditions, perceptions of those conditions and naming and framing practices. But so do understandings of who are the legitimate actors here, who has the right to speak and to take action. This is a fundamentally sociological concern, and one that then turns ‘disaster’ into an actionable concept, on which citizens, practitioners and policy-makers can work to reduce risks or improve management. We chose the acronym CUIDAR,
to take care, advisedly here, as it helps to bring out the underlying need for care in disaster risk reduction and management. To some extent we have aimed to push back against the security-based framing of safety, which favours technocratic responses such as surveillance devices, border controls and cyber crime deterrents, visible in the many projects developed within the EU Horizon 2020 programme. In contrast, a care-based approach looks to enhance resilience by supporting networks of social solidarity such as public sector health, social care and welfare systems. It also looks to democratising disaster risk management, in our case, by recognising the rights, skills and capacities of children and young people. We acknowledge that there is a rich and growing social scientific literature on disasters that we can only partly review in Chapter 1, confining ourselves to the aspects around children’s participation in DRM.

The closely related terms ‘disaster risk management’ and ‘disaster risk reduction’ sometimes get used interchangeably, and this can be confusing. For many groups such as Save the Children, disaster risk reduction (DRR) is the goal, the aim underpinning working with children and young people. DRR is closely associated with the UN, which has a dedicated office in Geneva (UNDRR), and has produced major policies such as the Sendai Framework and a ‘knowledge hub’ called Prevention Web which describes disaster risk management (DRM) as the implementation of DRR since it: ‘describes the actions that aim to achieve the objective of reducing risk’ (PreventionWeb.net, 2015). So where does our work sit within this? As Figure 0.2 above shows, our aim was to move through a path of research, engagement and action. We soon discovered, as suspected, that children and young people were positioned as a vulnerable group within DRM, whose actions and capabilities had little visibility among adult decision-makers. So our aim was to have children included as actors and as citizens in the implementation of risk reduction. In this way we place our work within DRM.

Resilience

When working with children in CUIDAR, we were often struck by articulations of agency and capacity, such as this example from Greece:

‘We want to be informed about how to react before, during and after the earthquake and we need to pass this knowledge on to the other members of the deaf community.’ (Georgia, 11 years old, deaf/hard of hearing group, Athens, Greece)
The experience and actions of children and young people is an emerging subfield of disaster studies. Such work has helped scholars from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, public health, geography and political science to understand, develop and expand how children and disasters interact, affect and transform each other. In particular, there is a growing area of research and practice that points to the need to encourage children’s perspectives, capacities and actions in disaster risk management and climate change adaptation across the globe (Pfefferbaum et al, 2018; Alburo-Cañete, 2019; Towers et al, 2019). This subfield is also distinguished by new diverse, creative and participatory methods and approaches that researchers and advocates have used to work with children in disaster situations, as we will detail later in this book.

A key text here is *Children of Katrina* (Fothergill and Peek, 2015), which reports a major seven-year follow-up study of cohorts of children in the disaster diaspora. The book invites us to understand the experiences of these children, the different reactions they had to the same event, and how their response and recovery was marked by key factors such as age, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, social support, the role of the school and family or the support of the public administration. In this sense, the book also talks about the factors that build and strengthen resilience. Far from being a concept that we can only associate with individual dimensions such as personality or personal skills, Fothergill and Peek make visible the structural social factors that are key to understanding children’s capacity to respond and recover in the face of disaster. These include, for example, access and capacity to mobilise resources and support at the social, political, institutional and/or school level. But equally important, the book also highlights the capacities and abilities, the talents and strengths, of children and young people to contribute to building resilience, for themselves, but also for their family and communities.

The CUIDAR project also confirmed the importance of thinking about resilience as something more than an individual adaptive property. Rather, as our participatory work showed, resilience is something that is achieved collectively, the fruit of empowering and creating interdependence, solidarity and agency, especially with those groups that are the most silenced and marginalised. In this context, children and young people play a fundamental role, for example, in providing resources and support to improve communication, care, knowledge or the empowerment and participation of their families and communities. While the objective of this book is not primarily to explore the complexities of the resilience concept, the subject of
a growing critical debate (see, for example, Grove, 2018), we will explore some of the lines of work around it that our participatory work with children opens up.

**Overview of chapters**

The chapters largely follow the process of first exploring and discussing the literatures and state of play around children’s participation in disaster risk management, through designing flexible and ethical approaches to engaging with children and young people, to the multiple outcomes and recommendations CUIDAR produced.

Chapter 1 shows how children, while affected by risk and disaster, are almost never involved in disaster risk management activities. We examine assumptions that are made about children and young people in disaster management, and how these affect and shape their participation. We draw on our analysis of 261 programmes, policies and practices developed in five European Union (EU) countries (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK), and discuss the results in the context of the international literature. Despite the growing interest in participatory approaches, the active participation of children and young people in disaster risk management is still scarce in Europe. In general, children and young people are seldom included in the management of disasters as they are mostly considered as a vulnerable group. Participation, if pursued, remains within a context of rules and goals determined by experts and other adults. The tokenistic views of most adults hinder participation and, although there is an increasing tendency to address this situation, children and young people are still under-represented in decision-making processes.

Chapter 2 concentrates on how we facilitated interactions between children and decision-makers. We describe the methodology for working with children and young people in Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK. We explain how we structured the work in stages: Dialogues with Children, Mutual Learning Exercises (MLEs) with children and stakeholders, and National Policy Debates to diffuse and discuss the results of the local endeavours. The aims and procedures in each stage, and how this was accomplished in each country, is explained, highlighting contextual adaptations.

Chapter 3 details what we learned from the CUIDAR process, reporting on what emerged from our interactions with children, exploring the range of risk and hazards they identified and prioritised, including wildfires, chemical leaks, earthquakes, flooding and heat waves. We discuss how those young people then went on to speak
about this to practitioners and decision-makers, providing them with insights and recommending improvements. We discuss the feedback, reactions and ‘barriers’ identified during the process. We draw on interviews and group discussions with experts and on the MLEs. These interactions show that children’s participation results in better decisions, higher-quality services, greater access to those services and better development outcomes as a result.

In Chapter 4 we explore how we built our Child-Centred Disaster Risk Management Framework in Europe. We introduce its main components (adult imaginaries about childhood; awareness of children’s rights; high-quality participation; importance of networks of allies; communication; intergenerational exchanges; managing emotions; and feeling safe in public spaces). Each step outlined in the Framework flows directly from our interactions with children and young people. Whether creating new plans or reviewing existing ones, these steps, if followed, will result in inclusive and culturally sensitive plans relevant before, during and after disasters. Each is explained in detail and linked with concrete examples from the CUIDAR experience. The chapter also critiques the very idea of ‘framework’, analysing the use of this policy and conceptual tool within both management and social science.

Chapter 5 discusses what we found to be the best resources and methods used to include children’s voices, with additional material and advice provided from experienced researchers and practitioners from across the world. Examples include participatory mapping, creative and artistic methods such as drawings, aerial photographs and the use of 3D shapes and games. This chapter encourages practical ways of promoting intergenerational learning, the use of new media to foster communication and informal learning and give more value to the local and grounded knowledge of children, their families and communities. It introduces best practices and found examples of the children’s agency in disaster management, both in Europe and globally. Policy-makers and practitioners can use these tools, methods and examples for inspiration and to promote more child-centred policy and practice.

In the ‘Concluding remarks’ chapter we take a wider, higher-level view of the CUIDAR project and its key themes. We look back on how our work resonates with theories of participation and citizenship, rights and disasters. We return to our acronym and explore how the notion of care has somehow been excised in the securitisation of DRM, which has increasingly prioritised notions of control, hierarchy and (national) sovereignty above notions of care, interdependence or vulnerability. We reflect on some of the ways that policy and practice have begun to change as a result of our project. Finally, we add a few
words about disaster stories and temporality to emphasise that our Framework for child-centred DRM does not have to be followed in any particular order, but has many entry points for those who wish to create a more inclusive future for this domain.