Children and Young People’s Participation in Disaster Risk Reduction

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Rights, information, needs and active involvement in disaster risk management

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‘We are children and we have power.’ (Leonidas, 12 years old, hard of hearing, Thessaloniki, Greece)

Introduction

Following exploration of our stepped approach in Chapter 2, here we detail how the roles children and young people can play in disaster risk management (DRM) started to become visible. What we learned from CUIDAR is useful not just for advancing knowledge about children’s agency, but also to provide practitioners with guidance on how to work with children, which outcomes to expect, and the advantages and challenges encountered along the way. This chapter draws on the Dialogues, Mutual Learning Exercises (MLEs) and National Policy Debates conducted in the five participating countries. It blurs the boundaries between different stages of the project to focus on transversal outcomes and lessons learned through continued work with children and adult stakeholders.

We begin by assessing the lay of the land with regard to children’s rights and participation in DRM, and how this was changed through the CUIDAR experience. Then we discuss how children appropriated the concept of disaster differently from standard definitions or as used by adult stakeholders, and the interplay between causes and impacts of disaster, by drawing from their own experiences and perceptions. Following this we highlight the importance placed both by children and adults to access reliable, accurate and useful information on DRM as well as strategies and means to convey that information to others. Finally, we address the imperative of considering children’s
needs while preparing for and responding to an emergency, as well as challenges in directly involving children in disaster risk reduction (DRR) actions.

**Rights and participation of children in disaster risk management**

We realised early on that both child and adult stakeholders were mostly unaware of children’s rights to participation. Many had never heard of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), let alone Article 12, which confers on them the right to have their voices heard in matters that concern them. Despite many years of participatory initiatives and citizen involvement in contemporary societies, and the best efforts of organisations such as UNICEF with programmes such as ‘Child-Friendly Cities’ (Malone, 2006), European educational systems, communities and families still largely disregard children’s citizenship rights. Children and young people are still to be educated and protected, rather than listened to and integrated into decision-making. Thus, CUIDAR activities were first aimed at raising awareness of children’s participation rights. With children this was achieved through the Dialogues, by generating discussions and tasks around the theme, but also by having them experience participatory methods and take the lead in making decisions about the work to be done.

These early discussions proved to be pivotal. In many cases the children demanded that the issue of their rights to participate be an integral part of the project process, such as the planned interactions with adults, the MLEs and the Policy Debates. DRM may have been the starting point but also then became part of the realisation of children’s citizenship in the wider sense. For instance, the children in Gandesa (Spain) prepared a message for the MLE that began: ‘We have the right to be informed and to give our opinion….’ While preparing child-led communication plans at the final stage of the Dialogues, among the key messages highlighted by the children and young people was the importance of participation. In many cases, the children wanted to include rights in their key messages, for example, ‘young people participate’, ‘young people can help’, acknowledging that asking questions and expressing their feelings is an important part of interaction with adult decision-makers.
Rights, information, needs and active involvement

Working on rights with disabled children: a case study from Greece

Disabled children in Greece found it empowering to discover their rights to participate in matters that affect them. Lack of awareness about these rights, especially for children with vision impairment who may have multiple disabilities, children who were deaf or hard of hearing and who may have additional disabilities is associated with the barriers and daily difficulties they face in accessing relevant resources, information, programmes and their limited opportunities to obtain information and experience spontaneously (Nikolaraizi et al, 2016b; Nikolaraizi et al, under review). To overcome such barriers, the children were encouraged to participate and express their views and ideas using accessible and participatory tools (see Chapter 4). Working with a group of 10- to 12-year-olds with vision disabilities and multiple disabilities, CUIDAR staff created two bags, ‘Rights’ and ‘Duties’, with tabs written in Braille to stimulate a debate. Working with this they created a 3D ‘Tree of Rights’, writing one or more rights they considered important on cards and sticking them on the tree: ‘I have the right to be informed’ (George, 10 years old, with a vision disability, Athens) and ‘I have the right to have a role to inform and prevent’ (Helen, 12 years old, with a vision disability and multiple disabilities, Athens).

Deaf and hard of hearing children expressed ideas mainly about the particular needs and rights essential for their lives, such as ‘equality’, ‘peace’, ‘education’ and ‘health’. They spoke of basic needs such as food, shelter and clothes, but also ‘safety’, ‘family’ and ‘play’. They were clear that teachers and parents should inform children of their rights. They stressed the importance of children knowing their rights so they could express and protect themselves, share their knowledge with friends and help others to be safe:

‘Parents should talk to their children about their rights and ... teachers, also.’ (Nick, 12 years old who is deaf and hard of hearing, Athens)

In Athens, when these children invited representatives from the local fire service to their Dialogue, they discussed the importance of taking the needs of disabled children into account (Nikolaraizi et al, 2016b; Nikolaraizi et al, under review).

Adult stakeholders also needed to be made aware of children’s rights. Despite the best intentions of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (UNDRR, 2015), with which most adults from the practitioner community were familiar, children were still mostly
seen as passive recipients of risk reduction education, at best as vehicles through which to deliver predetermined risk messages to families. Some adult stakeholders had very little or no experience in working with children in any other capacity than as potential victims or as a vulnerable group in need of rescue in case of disaster. Therefore, the prior sensitisation of emergency planners, civil protection staff and other adult stakeholders who would come into close contact with the children through CUIDAR events was critical. According to the Child-Centred Disaster Risk Reduction Toolkit (Plan International, 2010a), sensitisation helps to ensure a better, mutual understanding between all parties. Sensitisation can also help pave the way to better collaboration more generally, demonstrating by co-creation of interventions how to work towards mutually understood solutions.

Initially, our version of sensitisation was quite one-sided; we needed to ensure adults were well-versed in children’s rights and their particular needs to ensure they could effectively engage with young people during CUIDAR, activities and events. However, we learned how important it was for the children themselves to gain an insight into the adult stakeholders’ perspectives, and how to utilise this insight effectively. In that sense, we found it was important that children took a role in the sensitisation of the adults as this led to better outcomes, creating a two-way exchange and not merely something that was imposed on adult stakeholders. We sought to define the process of sensitisation of adults within three broad pillars: preparation, expectation setting and roles and responsibilities.

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**Sensitisation: a case study from Spain**

CUIDAR’s Spanish team held specific preparatory sessions for adult stakeholders in Barcelona, Gandesa, Sant Celoni and Lorca. The stakeholders included firefighters (working in both urban and rural areas), a forest engineer, press officers/journalists specialising in emergencies, an expert in technology development for emergencies, a local historian, civil protection practitioners, rangers, forest school teachers, emergency psychologists, chemical industry health and safety managers and local educational services professionals.

After first contact and sharing basic information about the project (preliminary outputs of the Dialogues and the objectives of the MLEs), all adult stakeholders were invited to a joint preparatory meeting in each location (where some adult stakeholders could not attend, individual meetings were held). There they received information about all the previous stages of the project, the final MLE
programme, the specific topics to be discussed and what was expected from them. The relevance of Article 12 of the UNCRC and the role ascribed to them as adult stakeholders in the CUIDAR project was highlighted. They learned that the MLE was co-organised with children and that adults should avoid giving talks or speeches, but instead support the children during the event and engage in dialogue with them. During the meetings, stakeholders’ reactions to this were diverse. Those who lacked experience with children were more ‘frightened’ and felt unprepared for such interaction, so they found these meetings reassuring in helping them to understand their role and our expectations for the MLE. Those who had more experience working with children were perhaps less worried about it, but the meetings also helped them understand the kind of interaction we sought. In this sense, they found our proposal positive and inspiring, since they were more used to talking to children than listening to them.

To help adult stakeholders focus on what was expected and to keep children and young people at the centre, adults were given three basic preparatory tasks for the MLE:

1. Think about how you can present yourself and your job in a child-friendly manner.
2. Think about the suggestions your children and young person’s group has made in your area of expertise (or the questions they have prepared for you).
3. Think about any questions you would like to ask children and young people that may be useful for your work.

The team emphasised that all adults should make an effort to let the children and young people take the lead during the event. However, adult stakeholders should also have the chance to ask questions so they can experience the benefits of working directly with children and young people, to take their opinions into account, in order to improve their participatory skills and ultimately, to make their work more effective.

This preparation helped the adult stakeholders feel more comfortable, and enabled CUIDAR facilitation of the Dialogues’ interactions. We had information from both sides, so we could propose or suggest to either (children and adults) to pose a question that we knew could be relevant for the children and that each specific stakeholder could answer.

However, some adults were unable to find time to participate in the preparatory meetings (even individually). Interestingly, it was noted that they were then less able to act in a participative manner in the MLE plenaries. They appeared to feel more insecure, and were more prone to long interventions and monologues, rather than actively listening and/or engaging in child-friendly ways. There
were also instances where ‘unsensitised’ adults corrected and/or completed the children and young people’s statements when they felt they were wrong or inaccurate.

Through this we saw how preparatory sessions were key to reshaping adult stakeholders’ conventional roles as ‘instructors’ towards a more egalitarian and dialogical relationship with children and young people. This is a proof of concept that sensitisation directly leads to better outcomes for mutual learning with children and young people.

Ideally, then, adult stakeholders would attend such sensitisation sessions, but where they could not, workarounds had to be found. For example, city councillors agreed to participate but could only offer limited time. In these cases, CUIDAR team members had short meetings with them or communicated with them via phone and email, to briefly explain the project and the concept of mutual learning. In these cases, facilitators did not ask these stakeholders to participate in the small group discussions, but only to make a short welcoming or closing speech, while having the opportunity to be present and listen to the children and young people and ask questions in the final plenary. In all cases, they stayed during only part of the MLE and fulfilled these expectations. This was a compromise we felt was ultimately worth making for the project, but it was not ideal.

Interestingly, we noticed there was a ‘performative’ effect of these events: for stakeholders, watching and listening first hand to the children and young people participating and presenting their ideas and in a format where children had the lead and where the adults’ role was to support them created a new dynamic. It was not only what children said that was effective, but also how they expressed themselves among adults.

Thus, adult stakeholders were led to recognise three key points:

- Children and young people’s participation is a right to be fulfilled: it is recognised by the UNCRC and states that they have the right to participate and contribute to issues, policies and discussions that affect their lives.
- Children and young people’s participation is possible: our work shows that participation is feasible, practicable and rewarding for the children, young people and adults involved.
- Children and young people’s participation is not only possible but also instrumental for DRM: evidence gathered shows that children can make valuable contributions – since they have clever
and innovative ideas and suggestions for disaster management, they envisage unanticipated needs, tools and improvements.

Below we give examples of how these interactions influenced adult stakeholders’ knowledge, understanding and support for children’s rights.

At the National Policy Debate in Italy, experts, practitioners, policymakers and families wrote a CUIDAR Manifesto/Children’s Charter along with the participating youth groups. This stated that children and young people have the right to participate in all phases of DRM, with special attention to reconstruction actions. The Manifesto also demanded that the UNCRC be posted on the walls in schools and disseminated in places where students gather and socialise.

At the Belfast MLE, the British Red Cross representative said he would take the CUIDAR approach to engage and equip young people in his organisation as a model of effective practice, and requested a copy of the session plans used for the Dialogues. In Edinburgh, the policy officer for community resilience with the Scottish Government attended the Policy Debate and then shared the CUIDAR outcomes with community resilience officers within all Scottish local authorities, uploading these to an internal information hub. Our work also helped shape YouthLink Scotland’s Toolkit to enable youth workers to build resilience among young people.

In Greece, after the National Policy Debate, the representative from the Civil Protection Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reconstruction representative stated:

‘It was a chance to acquire knowledge, share experiences with other stakeholders and on our responsibilities for the rights and needs of children with disabilities.’

Children reported feeling empowered from organising and leading the MLEs and Policy Debates, and found they were able to interact with adults as peers, discussing topics they, too, were experts in, and searching for solutions towards common objectives. Across the five participating countries and multiple locations, the children and young people told us their awareness of their own power and rights was heightened, and that they had increased confidence to participate effectively in decision-making processes.

‘I enjoyed this activity [Manifesto workshop] because the adults involved were very direct talking to us; they did
not treat us just as children, but also as experts.’ (Michela, 16 years old, Ancona, Italy)

**Children's concepts and experiences of disaster**

As we explored in the Introduction, the concept of disasters is much debated both in the academic, and, to some extent, practice literature. Dichotomies such as natural or technological, traditional or new, ‘acts of God’ or human-induced, sudden or slow, event or process, are now increasingly challenged and contested. The geographer and development studies scholar Piers Blaikie’s early intervention offered a strong challenge to conventional thinking:

Disasters, especially those that are connected in the minds of the public with [sic] natural disasters, are not the greatest threat to humanity. Despite the lethal reputation of earthquakes, epidemics, and famines, many more of the world’s population have their lives shortened by unnoticed events, illnesses, and hunger that pass for normal existence in many parts of the world, especially (but not only) the Third World [sic]. Occasionally earthquakes kill hundreds of thousands, and very occasionally floods kill millions at a time. But to focus on these … is to ignore the many millions more who are not killed in such events. There is a daily and unexceptional tragedy of those whose deaths are through “natural” causes. Under different economic and political circumstances they should have lived longer and enjoyed a better quality of life. (Blaikie et al, 1994: 3)

Yet ‘disaster’ remains highly codified in policy and practitioner documentation. For instance, the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) defined disaster as ‘a serious disruption, causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources’ (2005: 17). The subsequent *Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015* defined hazard as:

A potentially damaging physical event, phenomenon or human activity that may cause the loss of life or injury, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation. Hazards can include latent conditions that may represent future threats and can have different origins:
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natural (geological, hydrometeorological and biological) or induced by human processes (environmental degradation and technological hazards). (UNISDR, 2005: 1)

This definition is still in use in the subsequent Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (UNDRR, 2015). Laws and regulations, civil protection guidelines and official emergency plans are most often sustained in precisely defined circumscriptions of what constitutes a disaster and the types of disasters they address.

From the start, CUIDAR rejected a predefinition of disaster. Since our aim was to understand children’s perspectives and help give voice to these, we sought to elicit from children themselves what was a disaster for them and to focus the activities on what most concerned them. This raised some resistance from adult stakeholders, such as civil protection officers and teachers, who are used to working under the stricter confines of school curricula or disaster management plans. Children’s definitions were, perhaps unsurprisingly, much broader than practitioners’: ‘something bad we were not expecting’, ‘an event that causes destruction’, ‘a problem a country has’, ‘a thing that damages the environment’, ‘something dangerous’, ‘something negative’.

When asked to provide examples of disasters, in discussions or through drawings, children’s examples were comprehensive, ranging through the categories: ‘natural’ (earthquakes, landslides, forest fires, a plague of mosquitoes, wild boar, flood, snow and windstorms) to the ‘technological’ (plane crashes, train accidents, chemical spills), to the ‘social’ (terrorism, robberies, refugee crisis). In Spain, children discussed whether all disasters were caused by ‘natural hazards’, arguing mostly that they were, but that in many examples humans also had a prominent role (for example, car accidents that cause a fire, wildfires caused by fireworks) (see Figure 3.1).

Some groups of children discussed the difference between a risk ‘within your control’ and a risk ‘out of your control’, for example by differentiating between a ‘natural hazard’ and choosing to do something ‘risky’. In Greece, some children interpreted the notion of disaster as related to a localised context, such as family or work environment, whereas others had linked the notion of disaster to a broader context, more open and encompassing, such as a country or a continent. Examples of disasters brought forward by children were also strongly influenced by direct experience. In places such as Lorca in Spain and Concordia in Italy, with a recent history of earthquakes, that was the disaster that was mostly frequently mentioned by the children. In the Portuguese and some Greek locations, where children were
not calling on such history, representations of disasters came mostly from TV programmes and films, and tended to be large scale and international events, such as tsunamis or volcano eruptions, or inspired by emergency drills at school. However, children in Greece also mentioned the economic crisis and the inflow of refugees, influenced by the problems the country was undergoing at the time. In some cases, this experience could be more personal than communitarian: for instance, a child in Spain mentioned huge floods in Paraguay, his country of origin.

Children’s identification of disaster revealed multiple influences. A planetary collision or a black hole indicated that awareness of low-probability/high-impact disasters might be influenced by mass media exposure (films, comics). One group in Spain showed strong awareness of violence between people, to the extent that they repeatedly spoke of fights, violent dogs, guns and robberies. Children knew about these risks in some cases from seeing them on TV, in others from hearing about them from parents or grandparents, and in others by actual events that had occurred in their neighbourhoods.

Direct encounters with disasters meant that the children were more attuned to ideas about risk reduction, as well as place-based risks, and were quick to draw on personal and community experiences. The children in Italy, Spain and the UK who had experienced earthquakes or floods in recent years could quickly identify some of the major
impacts they and their families suffered. They discussed impacts on housing, schools, teachers, parks and businesses. Some of the children spoke about how the disasters had affected their grandparents’ graves and the impact of losing personal memories and possessions.

In Rochdale, UK, when asked what would happen if a flood were to happen locally, young children gave a clear picture of the impacts: ‘The school would be closed!…’, ‘Food wouldn’t be able to get in!…’, ‘The doors would be blocked…’, ‘You’d have to stay in your house until you starved…’, ‘Your house would need to be fixed…’, ‘You would have no money…’, ‘The council has to pay for it’.

In Lorca, young people appeared to be familiar with the concept of DRR, as well as with local risks and the chronology of disasters over the last 10 years. They quickly linked such concepts with personal experiences. For instance, drawing on their experience of the 2011 earthquake, they identified relationships between hazard, risk and disaster:

‘We have linked these three concepts, and we have said that the hazards/threat leads to risk and risk to disaster. Disaster is the event that causes damage. The risk is that we live in a seismic zone. Disasters negatively affect society, for example an earthquake. We have drawn a house that is falling, the trees are falling.’ (Alex, 17 years old, Lorca, Spain)

The children in other locations also strongly associated disasters with their impacts. A risk for them was associated with being in danger, going up the mountain and falling, someone entering a shop wearing a mask and wanting to kill you. In Greece, some children considered situations in which people could not go to work, to the supermarket, or where children could not play outside, to be disastrous. The children also said they were afraid of how they might react in case of a disaster and how they would manage their feelings:

‘If there is a flood and people go out they may die.’ (Maria, 12 years old, deaf/hard of hearing group, Athens, Greece)

‘During an earthquake a whole town can be destroyed.’ (Vassilis, 10 years old, with a vision disability and multiple disabilities, Athens, Greece)

When the children investigated local disasters by searching online and interviewing family members and neighbours (see Chapter 2), they
discovered events that had happened in their community which they were unaware of. Through this they came to an understanding of their impacts. These activities were an opportunity to explore local changes in recent years, focusing on social, economic, environmental and industrial aspects, and to help visualise such events, experiences and conditions. For instance, during a timeline building exercise, a group in Italy discovered how the city layout had been redesigned after a major flood in the 1960s. In this process, some parts of the neighbourhood had disappeared, while other parts were built to host the displaced population, and many of the young people found that they were living in this ‘new’ neighbourhood. As a result, they decided to put what they had learned into an infographic about the frequency of floods and the impact of the recovery process.

In Greece, children with sensory disabilities discovered the history of disasters in their locality through newspapers and videos. This allowed them to identify impacts such as environmental damage, economic or material loss, human and animal loss, home evacuation, and emotional and health consequences:

‘When a forest is burned, we do not have oxygen and this is bad for the environment.’ (John, 11 years old, deaf and hard of hearing group, Thessaloniki, Greece)

‘Because people have lost their homes from the water and their belongings have been destroyed.’ (Peter, 12 years old, deaf and hard of hearing group, Athens, Greece)

‘If there is a flood and people go out they may die.’ (Anna, 11 years old, deaf and hard of hearing group, Thessaloniki, Greece)

‘People are terrified when an earthquake happens.’ (Stella, 12 years old, deaf and hard of hearing group, Athens, Greece)

‘During an earthquake, people can lose their lives.’ (John, 6 years old, with a vision disability, Volos, Greece)

Interactions with practitioners and community representatives during CUIDAR Dialogues and MLEs allowed the children to acquire new information and perspectives on local hazards and disasters. In Sant Celoni (Barcelona) the Dialogues showed the knowledge gap that
the young people had about local industries: they could situate them on the map but did not know what they produced or the risks they may represent in case of an accident, even though they participated in two annual ‘confinement’ drills in their high school. For this reason, a visit to one of the major companies that was involved in a chemical accident (a toxic chlorine cloud release) 20 years before was organised. Through this visit, participants could see in situ the safety mechanisms that the industry uses. They could also gain insight into what chemical risk means – for example, they had to turn off mobile phones and put on protective clothing to tour the facilities. Later, the young people produced a map of actors involved in emergencies, addressing some of their queries, and identifying who were the important actors in a chemical incident. At the MLE, a specific discussion about this topic involved two experts: the person in charge of health and safety and the city council economic development representative. The current city mayor, who was the doctor in charge of emergencies at the hospital during the 1996 chemical accident, shared this experience with the young people. This had an effect on children’s perceptions of the risks:

‘We have learnt that chemical industries have more security than we thought. We have learnt a medical doctor’s point of view (the mayor) about a chemical accident.’ (Young person after the MLE, Sant Celoni, Spain)

The MLE also raised awareness among adult stakeholders of the need to include children and young people in their communication efforts:

‘Young people do not have information about chemical industries located near them; we should have a communication strategy so they become aware of the preparedness knowledge they need in case of an accident.’ (Chemical industry manager, Sant Celoni, Spain)

‘Young people need to have more real knowledge about the industries around them, what they do, and the different qualifications needed to work there, and overcoming the Industrial Revolution image they still have about these kinds of jobs.’ (City council enterprise officer, Sant Celoni, Spain)

Similarly, in Lorca, the city councillor for planning, environment and post-earthquake recovery had held the same position during the 2011 earthquake and could detail how the council had responded to the event.
Children’s access to information and communication

The right of participation cannot be enacted without access to knowledge and information. Therefore, the first step is making sure children have access to relevant information, but also establishing two-way communication between them and adult stakeholders. Child-led risk education programmes play a central role in preparing children for active participation in DRM discussions and activities (Ronan and Johnston, 2005; Towers et al, 2014; Benadusi, 2015). Children also have a proven track record as privileged risk communicators who can convey risk reduction measures to their families and communities (Lopez et al, 2012; Towers et al, 2014), particularly in contexts where they tend to be well informed or speak the local language more fluently than migrant parents (Mitchell et al, 2008).

Having practical information about what to do in an emergency and who to contact was seen by the children in CUIDAR as very important. They told us that having reliable information sources was a way to be more resilient, to keep safe and avoid further stress and anxiety during emergencies:

‘The more we discuss and know about the earthquakes, the more we can think how to react in case of an earthquake in order to not panic.’ (John, 12 years old, hard of hearing, Thessaloniki, Greece)

‘Children do not know how to act when we are alone in case of emergency due to a forest fire. We know what to do in school due to the drills, but I would not know what to do if we were alone, I would be blocked. We would be scared and we would get nervous.’ (Marta, 12 years old, Gandesa, Spain)

The children also wanted to inform their families and peers about risks and disasters, and share ways of being prepared:

‘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 of our school.’ (Georgia, 11 years old, deaf and hard of hearing, Athens, Greece)
‘The project helped me to know better the risks where I live, and I have to explain these to my parents and the rest of the village.’ (Sara, 14 years old, Ancona, Italy)

Peer-to-peer information sharing was highlighted in several cases as being particularly effective. The young people at the MLE in Loures, Portugal, proposed that students should have a role in training younger people on safety procedures at their school. Later, at the National Policy Debate, they suggested being in contact with young people who had direct experience of disasters. In Spain, at the Lorca MLE, the young people recommended the creation of social support and peer support groups. In Sant Celoni the young people suggested the use of social networks for spreading information among peers and not just from official channels.

The children also pointed out the importance of emergency procedures and general knowledge about risks being accessible to all. For instance, a group in Northern Ireland felt very strongly that the ‘General Household Emergency Life-Saving Plan’ (Belfast City Council) was not child-friendly, and how it was important that more children know what to do in an emergency. So they took the initiative to design a child-friendly leaflet about this plan, which was distributed to the adult stakeholders participating in the event, including parents/families, emergency planning officers from Belfast City Council, designated emergency preparedness group members and British Red Cross representatives.

The children often pointed out that people who are deaf or hard of hearing face several accessibility barriers. For example, one child reported:

‘If a fire breaks out during the night, then what we are supposed to do since we cannot hear the fire alarm … you see we are not wearing our hearing aids to bed…. I know that I have to put the batteries for my hearing aids in the emergency bag.’ (Andrew, 12 years old, hard of hearing, Thessaloniki, Greece)

The children in Athens made an agreement to collaborate with the fire service in order to organise relevant events and actions, leading to the signing of an agreement.
Risk education: a case study from Thessaloniki, Greece

After hearing about a forest fire within the city of Thessaloniki in 1997, the children expressed interest in a site visit. Although this is the only forest around the city, the majority of the children had never been there before. They wanted to be informed about the benefits of the forest, the risks of fire and how to take action before, during and after a forest fire. The visit was made possible through the cooperation of officials from the Forestry of Thessaloniki.

The children stressed the importance of learning about the Seih Sou forest and issues of risk reduction by writing a letter to the Centre of Environmental Education (CEE) about the CUIDAR project and suggesting a joint visit. During this, students talked with the representatives and learned about forest protection. The children also asked to meet the Hellenic Rescue Team and visit the Town Hall to communicate their ideas and ask for more risk reduction education and fire prevention measures for the forest. During their visit to Thessaloniki Town Hall the children met the managers of the Resilient City project. The children presented their work in relation to the CUIDAR project and the relevant activities at their school.

The use of ICT was a recurrent topic in this work. Since children tend to be ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001), not only did they often choose digital tools to convey their messages (see Chapters 2 and 5), but they also highlighted their importance in communication about disasters. At the MLE in Sant Celoni, Spain, the children proposed using digital technologies to spread information about chemical risks, including: creating communication videos; publishing risk information, news and alerts via social networks used by young people (for example, Instagram) or via chat services (for example, WhatsApp); and creating a specific app for smartphones that automatically activates in case of emergency and sends children’s locations to their parents/family. In Gandesa, the young people also suggested using social networks to communicate what to do in case of forest fire. Some children were unaware that authorities already use digital technologies to communicate with citizens. In one UK Policy Debate, the children were impressed to hear about the British Red Cross’s first aid app:

‘We have learnt that our city council has social network accounts.’ (Young people, Sant Celoni, Spain)
At the Portuguese Policy Debate one joint discussion group proposed creating a digital communication platform about DRR targeted at young people. At the Italian Policy Debate, the head of the Calabrian Civil Protection Agency, who had already participated in the MLE in Crotone, asked a youth group to play an active role in using and sharing ‘Easy Alert’, a mobile phone app developed by the Regio Civil Protection Agency. This app enables citizens to report disasters in real time in the region and to convey information to the 24-hour operational regional structure. Events such as fires, landslides, floods, earthquakes, tsunamis, storms, strong winds and road accidents can be immediately geo-located. Users downloading the app can call for help directly to the Civil Protection operating room and report emergencies by sending a photograph and text that tells the story or signals victims. This request by the Civil Protection Agency for children to use the system implies recognition of their capacity to understand events and communicate them to the relevant authorities and their competence with communication technologies. It also implies a meaningful understanding of children’s participation by adults and local authorities in preparedness and response activities. Hopefully it can also signify a route to cultural change in how society and policymakers see children’s role in this field.

However, digital systems were not seen to be a magic bullet. In the Glasgow Dialogues we realised that most of the children had low levels of literacy and many did not speak English as a first language. They found printed and online materials difficult to follow, and videos were often narrated with a local accent, reducing accessibility for those children. In addition, children in Spain and Italy who had previously experienced earthquakes shared their concern about the reliability of communications during an emergency and the limitations (and dangers) of online communication. In Spain, the Lorca group stated that rumours after the 2013 earthquake had produced further distress. One student reported that ‘People passed by in a van saying that another earthquake would come, that we had to leave, so they could steal from the houses.’ They also talked about the importance of creating reliable sources of information, centralised by the public authorities, and to have spaces for debate and sharing of experiences and knowledge among citizens. They recognised the importance of social networks and mobile phones, but they were also aware that these may not work in a disaster situation (in Lorca, in fact, the phones stopped working in the first hours after the earthquake). Also, the Ancona group in Italy remarked that after the earthquake, they came
across a lot of fake and unreliable information on the internet which caused more anxiety and fear about what happened or could happen. Both groups underlined the importance of access to trustworthy and official information during emergencies. As a result, information and communication issues figured quite highly in the commitments made by adult stakeholders in their interaction with the children. 

In Crotone (Italy), participants built a ‘Decalogue of good practices’ which prioritised, among other things, ‘communication’, ‘attention to people with vulnerabilities’, ‘training about emergencies’, ‘knowledge of risks’ and ‘training about safety in emergencies’. Suggestions about how to overcome the lack of young people’s involvement were proposed, such as creating youth forums and clubs to make institutions communicate with young people; setting up a ‘day of participation’ every year organised by the municipality; and designing projects in schools to enhance participation and create synergies with local authorities. At the National Policy Debate, young people, policymakers, experts, practitioners and parents built a CUIDAR Manifesto/Children’s Charter; a main feature of this was that children and young people should receive appropriate training about all kinds of hazards and how to protect themselves. 

This Manifesto states:

We would like to learn at school the topics on disaster risk reduction and emergencies together with geography, science and other subjects. It is so important to know these things, to know how to behave in an emergency and to know the risks, vulnerabilities and resources of where we live, these things save our lives…. The information we provide must be understandable, and our kits, videos, brochures, and sites where there are risk information campaigns must take account of our capabilities and needs. For example, interactive games for children could be developed to teach about the risks and how to deal with them.

In Portugal, roundtable discussions at the Policy Debate led to proposals on participatory risk education including: developing ways to foster a better knowledge of the places children live in; summer camps and awareness initiatives targeted at specific groups; focused discussion groups in neighbourhoods; slots dedicated to the topic in the school curricula; joint risk working groups between children and adults; and youth assemblies where young people can discuss improvements and implement good practice (see Figure 3.2).
Rights, information, needs and active involvement

Risk and education: a case study from Sant Celoni, Spain

At Sant Celoni, the way the city council works on chemical risk with children has been transformed based on what was learned at the CUIDAR MLE. Simultaneously the council education and economic development departments started a project to address a problem faced by the industry: a shortage of qualified workers for the next generation, predicted in five to ten years. To address this, the council, supported by the industry, launched the Montquímic project in 2017, an educational programme for primary and secondary teachers and students, to increase children and young people’s interest in chemistry. This includes teacher training, experiments, industry site visits and a public competition for students, and coincides with the re-launch of a vocational training course in Industrial Chemistry in the high school participating in CUIDAR.

The MLE worked as an exercise to connect all these challenges and actions around chemical risk, and start a collaboration based on economic development, education and civil protection. As a result, the 2018–19 version of Montquímic included specific activities on chemical risk, based on the young people’s suggestions:

- Getting to know the local chemical industries: where are they and what do they produce?

Figure 3.2: Proposals for risk education, national Policy Debate, Portugal
• Learning about chemical risk and how it affects the municipality (working with risk maps, sirens and drills, and self-protection advice).
• Organising visits to the industrial plants.
• Developing a communication and sensitisation campaign for the district about chemical risk.

Initially, Montquímic consisted of conducting scientific experiments at schools, an exhibition fair, some field trips to the industries, and other ‘playful’ activities. After CUIDAR the project began involving firefighters and added the chemical risk perspective transversally: not only as a risk education activity linked to civil protection but also concerning health and safety issues when doing school experiments as well as the potential risk of industries for the whole population. Specific teacher training was also included. This integrated and collaborative approach will also be applied to another risk that affects the locality: forest fires. Located next to the two most extensive Natural Parks in the Barcelona area, Sant Celoni attracts visitors to its forests, an important source of local income.

The annual Forest Week event organised by the council to promote this economic relationship with the forest area included for the first time activities centred on fire risk reduction. In the 2019 Forest Week edition, firefighters participated in (1) an exhibition of one of their trucks and the tools they usually use, where assistants could respond to questions this prompted (aimed mostly at children); and (2) talks by professional and volunteer firefighters about forest fire prevention and the work they do (aimed mostly at adults).

Needs and actions of children in disaster situations

CUIDAR brought children and adults together to discuss the actions that should be undertaken before, during and after a disaster. As seen in Chapter 1, there is a rich literature on the roles children play in averting disasters or acting when they strike, mostly in developing countries. Mitchell et al (2008) show how in El Salvador children’s clubs were instrumental in identifying local risks and developing campaigns to raise awareness and push for measures to reduce those risks. In the Philippines, children campaigned to have schools relocated to safer ground, despite the opposition of adults (Tanner, 2010). During Hurricane Stan in El Salvador, youth groups facilitated the evacuation of families at risk and managed an emergency camp set up in their school (Tanner, 2010; Seballos et al, 2011). After Typhoon Yolanda in
the Philippines, Finnegan (2014) organised consultations with children to ascertain their views on the effects of the disaster, their priorities for action and their suggestions for improving the response. She learned that children had credible views on these matters, that they had played an important role in the evacuation and risk mitigation before the events, that they helped in the recovery of their communities and wanted to learn more to prepare for future emergencies.

Peek (2008: 14) states that children have specific skills and traits that make them particularly useful in tackling disasters: ‘Children’s knowledge, creativity, energy, enthusiasm, and social networks could be utilized during all phases of the disaster life cycle’. CUIDAR’s Dialogues prompted the children and young people to explore concepts including vulnerability, capacity and resilience. The Dialogues in Ancona and Crotone (Italy) encouraged the teenagers to define resilience (a concept they had learned in science classes) and suggest some actions to enhance preparedness locally. In Gandesa (Spain), the children were not aware of the concept of ‘resilience’ but, after discussing it, came to associate it with ‘the process of mourning and recovery after losing an important person’. They also identified ways to help people to be resilient, including teamwork, education, managing emotion, physical strength, independence, perspective, maturity, life experience and problem-solving skills.

When talking about vulnerability, the children showed a strong empathy for groups, for example, older people, babies and toddlers, who might be adversely impacted in emergency situations. But they also identified other groups with particular vulnerabilities such as people living far from the village, town or city, people with mental health problems, foreigners who do not know the territory or language, tourists, wheelchair users and children who would not know who to call or what to do. They came up with suggestions to address the needs of more vulnerable people, such as organising food donations, providing shelter for displaced people, entertaining small children in shelters, and giving psychological support for those affected by disasters and for people rendered homeless:

‘We should do more about disabled people and how children can take care of them, and help them escape in a flood.’ (Kasen, 10 years old, Salford, UK)

The children also highlighted the vulnerability of domestic animals. In a Dialogue in Lisbon, 4th graders (aged 9-10) developed a performance centred on a dog injured in a flood and the efforts of first responders
to save it. This resonates with the literature that shows that disaster impacts on pets and animals can cause distress and feelings of loss in children, who often point out the need to prioritise their safety (Looman, 2006; FEMA, 2010; Walker et al, 2012; Harwood et al, 2014; Towers, 2015):

‘The trees and the animals are burned; the animals lose their home when there is a fire in the forest.’ (Nick, 11 years old, deaf and hard of hearing group, Thessaloniki, Greece)

The Italian CUIDAR Manifesto/Children’s Charter states that emergency planning should take into account those who are more vulnerable. For instance, training should be provided for disabled people and for all those who could help them; information on what to do during an emergency and accessing safe places should be highlighted in different ways (using colour, sound, different languages); and assistance for disabled people during emergencies should be foreseen and architectural barriers eliminated.

The children also felt it would be important in emergencies to secure the places they see as safe community hubs, such as schools and historic buildings. In Concordia sulla Secchia, Italy, the children created a video about the places that had been destroyed and then abandoned after the 2012 earthquake and that they identified as important for them and the community (CUIDAR, 2018b). These places were the old school, the old opera theatre and the church, all located in the historic centre of the city that was severely damaged. Five years later, many of these buildings were still closed or under construction, but the community and the children had no information about the local municipal reconstruction plans or timetable for reopening. The video served as a way of reaching the authorities, and as a result, the Mayor gave an interview providing answers, and the video has since been shown at school events for other students.

In Portugal, the 9th graders (aged 13–14) in Loures chose to focus on the vulnerabilities of their school buildings and surrounding areas to extreme weather events, such as storms and cold waves. They pointed out that gutters were blocked with litter, there were holes in the path to the school entrance, the playing field was inadequately built (it flooded in heavy rain), there were deficiencies in the condition of the school buildings and a lack of heating in the classrooms (making them extremely cold in winter). The children asked for a new electrical grid with enough capacity to heat classrooms and for renovations. They proposed raising awareness among younger students of the need to
adopt safety behaviours when in school, such as sheltering during a storm, and to organise a litter clearing competition to mitigate flood risk in the school. The city councillor in attendance at the MLE recognised that the school had infrastructural problems, recalling the time when she herself had studied there. Some months later, we ascertained that some renovation work had been done, at least on the school entrance path. The school board had also decided to close down the playing fields during recess, citing the lack of safety highlighted by the children.

Children and adults at the Policy Debate in Italy agreed that school had to be a safe place and education should not be interrupted in an emergency. Their Manifesto recommended:

- Our schools need more maintenance; old and/or damaged buildings must be rebuilt with suitable materials and in safe areas.
- During the rainy season, schools should not be closed in advance for the fear of the rain getting in. We have the right to go to school and not to miss lessons.
- Our schools must be safe, must have the certificates required by law, and above all schools should have an emergency plan. The plan must be familiar to all students, teachers and all those attending school, including our parents.

Including children’s needs in civil protection: a case study from Italy

At the Policy Debate in Rome, adult stakeholders reported that CUIDAR and previous work with Save the Children Italy had allowed them to depart from more traditional approaches to consider the specific needs of children and young people. The national director of civil protection operations acknowledged that the civil protection system was mainly concerned with meeting the basic needs of the population in a disaster, such as providing food and shelter, rather than taking issues such as education, child-friendly spaces and children’s specific services into consideration. He explained how in recent years the civil protection system was changing and becoming more aware and inclusive of children's needs.

The Lazio director of civil protection recognised the importance of having child participation measures in the system, and talked about the Memorandum of Understanding signed with Save the Children in 2016, an agreement that allows the NGO to install child-friendly spaces in areas where people had been displaced.
This agreement enabled the regional agency to start specific training for civil protection personnel and volunteers about children's needs in emergencies.

The delegate from the National Association of Municipalities (ANCI) talked about what mayors can do to include children’s protection measures within municipal emergency plans, namely, to guarantee emergency educational continuity, mapping and coordinating civil protection volunteering, supporting child-friendly spaces and working closely with schools in risk reduction programmes. The Marche Region civil protection official explained how child-friendly ‘modules’ were now included within their emergency response assets.

In all the Dialogues, the children and young people collectively designed communal plans for disaster preparedness that would diminish the impact of disasters on children’s lives. While the children were not given any specific information about official civil protection recommendations for addressing risks in advance, many measures they proposed were seen to be logical and reflected official advice, although in arguably more interesting ways and innovative formats. Although some measures were similar to official advice, the children were usually more ambitious, particularly in relation to disaster recovery.

**Children’s risk reduction measures: a case study from Portugal**

In Albufeira, the children and young people elected to work on urban flooding, since the city had experienced severe events a few years previously. After collecting information about the 2015 floods, examining local maps and interviewing civil protection officers, the children devised a set of risk reduction measures for before, during and after the floods in three different domains: at home, at school and in the city. These measures formed the backbone of the MLE, which had the participation of the mayor, the councillor for civil protection, all the civil protection office staff, the head of the fire department, representatives from the maritime authority and the local police. Children presented the measures through drawings (4th graders, aged 9–10) and a PowerPoint presentation (9th graders, aged 13–14).

The measures ranged from the practical:

- Close doors and windows
- Turn off the electricity and gas
- Go to a higher point
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to the more imaginative:

Buy a rowing boat
Have lifejackets at school
Build a bunker at school, with supplies

Some measures reflected civil protection advice:

Distribute chores among family members and set up a rendezvous point
Prepare an emergency backpack and a first aid kit
Call the police and the fire department

Whereas others showed heightened social awareness:

Help students with special needs to protect themselves
Ask for help from social security in case rehousing is needed
Help people in need (elderly, younger children, disabled people, people in public spaces)

Some measures were eminently preventive:

Know the vulnerabilities of the city
Have more drains in the school
Create more green areas and with permeable pavements

And others were meant to be put in place once disaster strikes:

Remove manhole covers
Do volunteer work
Organise food collection campaigns and have a place where people rendered homeless can stay and have activities

Adult stakeholders’ reactions to these proposals varied. While a teacher and the head of the fire department criticised the idea of building bunkers, pointing out these were suitable for tornadoes but not for floods, the head of civil protection commented that if one was to interpret ‘bunker’ in the wider sense of a safe place, such as a high place during a flood, then the suggestion made perfect sense. The fire department commander explained that removing manhole covers might lead to people falling into the holes. Young people also proposed creating school-based civil protection clubs, an idea met with immediate approval by the local authorities.

‘And we also want to take advantage of and congratulate you on this great idea you had with regard to civil protection clubs. We will meet with the teachers and with you and will take this forward, because your involvement, your ideas, your active participation are extremely important,
because as the Mayor said, you are our future, our diamonds, and civil protection begins in each of us. And the earlier, the better! You are all welcome.’ (Civil protection councillor, Albufeira MLE, Portugal)

By discussing and finding feasible common solutions with adults, the children realised how much CUIDAR had enhanced their DRR knowledge, skills and abilities, as well as their citizenship. They could also see that preparedness and mitigation measures proposed by experts, civil protection officials and other attendees were not new to them, but that they could contribute new material and a fresh perspective to the debates:

‘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 person after the National Policy Debate, Portugal)

Adult stakeholders mostly commended the children’s work in examining risk and proposing actions to mitigate them:

‘All the work you have done is very, very, very important for the firefighters, because our society only thinks of fires when they see the smoke, and then they want a firefighter to go there and put it out. That children like you are working on this subject is very important to us because we can also learn a lot from you.’ (Catalan firefighters’ head press officer, MLE, Spain)

‘We always learn. We always learn from each other. And in fact, being able to participate in a session like this with children in grades 4 and 9 is really a unique learning experience. This is fabulous!’ (Operational commander, Municipal Civil Protection Service, Portugal)

However, what he said next calls into question whether he did acknowledge the value of children’s contributions. By using words such as ‘naïveté’ or ‘purity’, he seems to relegate children to the usual role of innocent beings, inexperienced and unable to provide useful contributions:
‘It is here that one must begin, by listening to these children, because their naiveté conveys to us what purity is! Their honesty, frankness, therefore, is where we can take, in fact, a … I will not say experience, because they have no experience, of course, but an honesty about things, about which we can reflect.’

Throughout this work it became clear that, in emergencies, children wanted to do more than be the passive recipients of assistance. They wanted to take part in all aspects of disaster management, from prevention to reconstruction. Across the board in all countries, the children called for opportunities for active involvement:

‘I learned when there is a flood and it has stopped, you can help clean up the environment and other people’s homes. I want people to be happy and healthy.’ (Isaac, 9 years old, Salford, UK)

This was perhaps the most challenging aspect in which to sensitise adult stakeholders, but some of their statements lead us to think that some change of perspective was achieved:

‘Somehow this project shows us the way. We have to reach children and young people in schools, in their recreational spaces, and find ways on how to discuss with them about issues that sometimes are seen as far from their own knowledge. But we have seen that it’s not like this because these issues have to deal with their territory, homes and schools and it’s important to find ways to communicate these issues as the CUIDAR project did.’ (Head of Operations, Department of Civil Protection, after the Policy Debate in Italy)

In Swansea, Wales, the MLE showed that those in key roles within the local authority and emergency services, such as the police, fire and ambulance service, had thought that it was enough just to listen to the children’s voices, but the event highlighted that there was clearly a gap in their planning and procedures, something they all pledged to examine. All attendees promised to ensure that in future planning they would consult with children. A staff member of Natural Resources Wales said that he had learned ‘how amazing children are
with learning about the type of thing we would usually try to shelter them from’.

**Children in emergency planning: a case study from Italy**

In April 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding to promote inclusion of children’s needs within municipal emergency plans was signed between officials from the Marche Region, the Ombudsman for Children and Young People, the Marche Association of Municipalities and Save the Children. The Ombudsman’s support for this initiative was strengthened by his involvement in the CUIDAR project. The agreement followed work started by Save the Children in 2015 with the Marche Civil Protection Agency as part of the trialling of ‘Child-Centered Guidelines for Emergency Planning’. Then, during a CUIDAR event, the Ombudsman met a delegation of young people and learned how their active involvement in the project led them to design a child-friendly version of the local emergency plan for use on mobile phones. Consequently, the Agency published this child-friendly plan on its institutional web page, demonstrating a new willingness to recognise children’s role in strengthening community resilience to disasters.

**Conclusion**

To give effect to children’s participation rights is a challenging goal, and even more so in the context of DRM in European risk-averse societies. Some theories of risk society (Scott, 2000; Ekberg, 2007; Faulkner and Ball, 2007) postulate that rather than ‘risk societies’ we live in ‘risk-averse societies’ or ‘angst societies’, overly concerned with avoiding and eliminating all risk. A ‘children at risk’ discourse (Hope et al, 2007) positions children as vulnerable potential victims in all spheres of their lives, from playground games to online activities, constantly in need of supervision by adults. Emergency planners and even education professionals work in fields mostly dominated by images of childhood that underestimate young people’s knowledge, autonomy and capabilities (Gibbs et al, 2014b), and children may learn to reproduce these expectations, undermining their resilience:

Without experience of adversity, a child may be protected but has nothing to adapt to positively and so will not become resilient. A risk-averse society will, paradoxically, exacerbate rather than reduce the very vulnerabilities
it seeks to protect by undermining the development of resilience. (Livingstone, 2013: 24)

Thus, involvement in participatory practices that question these traditional hierarchies may have a transformative effect. Most of CUIDAR’s adult stakeholders realised how much they might be missing from not taking children’s voices into account, not just for all that children know about themselves, but also about the communities where they live, detailed local information that can be crucial in case of an emergency. Similarly, children feel empowered and eager to learn more and take action, when they are given an appropriate space to contribute. This is a topic that can generate fears and anxiety if not suitably presented to children.

However, to design and implement such participatory experiences is time-consuming and requires a group of facilitators trained in highly reflective, flexible and context-sensitive approaches. Moreover, when considered only as an exception to the ordinary way of doing things (for both children and adults), participation becomes fragile and anecdotal, and even counter-productive to its transformative potential, as it can easily deteriorate into tokenism. To merely consult children, without giving their proposals meaningful consideration, is almost worse than not listening to them at all. It only reinforces among them the notion that adults do not take them seriously and may discourage them from participating in future. Therefore, successful participatory DRR practices with children and young people need to be part of broader participatory ecosystems and attitudes that seek to include diverse voices, knowledge, ideas and actions to build community resilience.

Note

Whenever possible, we endeavour to identify the sources of these quotes, for both the children (pseudonym, age, location) and adults (position, location). However, in some cases we performed anonymous evaluations (for instance, through online surveys or post-it notes placed on walls) or group discussions.