Children and Young People’s Participation in Disaster Risk Reduction

Rodriguez-Giralt, Israel, Mort, Maggie

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Concluding remarks: Reimagining children’s place in disaster risk management

Israel Rodríguez-Giralt, Maggie Mort and Ana Delicado

In developing a cultural framework for disaster risk management (DRM), CUIDAR has been a transformative project. In particular, such a project had to be sensitive to the ideas, needs and imaginaries of children and young people, a group that is particularly dismissed and neglected when authorities are considering, planning for and responding to hazard and disaster situations. From the beginning, we knew that this was going to be a major challenge, due to the dearth of examples, guidance and best practice, particularly at a European level. But it was also challenging because placing children and young people’s participation at the centre of the project would imply a major transformation for most of the actors involved in DRM, from schools to policy-makers, from experts to emergency responders. This was foreshadowed in our Scoping Review, as Chapter 1 points out, in which we found few legal, political and practical examples of children’s meaningful participation in this field. In addition we found very little knowledge and awareness of children’s rights. This context then served to foreground one of the main challenges for CUIDAR: dealing with a well-established ‘adultist’ culture of DRM that mostly prioritises the voices of practitioners and experts.

Thinking about the notion of cultures of disaster resilience among children and young people involves placing an emphasis on children’s capacities rather than their vulnerabilities. Cultures are those that grow up in particular places (to borrow from the biological sense) and reflect shared meanings between people, materials and places. We have seen through the examples in this book how groups of young people living with risk have intervened to reduce that risk by drawing on their acute awareness of local conditions (for example, Glasgow, the UK and Sant Celoni, Spain). We have also seen how young people have learned from disaster itself, to express what matters to them in developing prevention measures (Lorca, Spain) and the recovery process (Concordia, Italy). Then we saw how children who, through their research on risk and disaster, develop priorities for preparation and adaptation (Athens, Greece). And how, through investigating
their environment, namely their school, young people were able to make suggestions for mitigating risk (Loures, Portugal). In some cases, the children also expressed a wish to be directly involved in disaster recovery, through volunteering and helping other vulnerable groups (Albufeira, Portugal) (see Figure 6.1).

**Figure 6.1:** 'Information about children: Children have the right to participate and help in all disasters because they have good ideas, and can participate in situations like floods’ (part of a leaflet produced by 4th graders, Loures, Portugal)

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**Talking about participation**

Taking a ‘cultures of participation’ approach we found Hart’s ‘ladder of participation’ to be an important source of inspiration for CUIDAR. As Hart acknowledged (1992), the main objective of this metaphor
was to stimulate a critical dialogue about an issue, a political practice, that had been progressively forgotten. Drawing on Arnstein’s ladder for adults (1969), Hart rearticulated different levels of participation for a group for which this was a scarce commodity. Undoubtedly, the simplicity of Hart’s ladder has helped to create a common language, making visible and valuing a whole series of possible, and generally rare, participative practices. However, as Hart (2008) later himself regretted, the ladder has also come to work as an excessively normative and universalistic model of development and evaluation of participation. Focusing on ranking and classifying forms of participation, it has been possible to forget that this was a tool mainly to encourage further adult recognition and respect for the rights of children and young people. Following Hart’s initial impulse, our conclusions here are also aimed at opening, rather than closing, questions and debates to encourage and reimagine children and young people’s participation. They also draw on lessons learned during CUIDAR.

For instance, the project has helped us to learn that when we speak of children’s lack of participation we are mostly talking about their lack of chances to participate formally in public and political life, and specifically in DRM. As we saw in the Dialogues and Mutual Learning Exercises (MLEs), children already participate daily and informally, with adults or among peers, in a multitude of activities and decision-making processes. They participate within their family, community and school, and even public and political spheres, as several youth movements around the climate crisis currently show. The problem, therefore, is not so much participation, but the formalisation of such participation. That is, its inclusion as a strategic voice and action in policy-making and decision-making within risk and disaster management. There are several reasons that explain this lack of (formal) participation, but one of the main ones must be found in the adult world: in its stances of indulgence, tokenism, active resistance or even obstruction towards children’s voices and agencies. This is why CUIDAR has focused on empowering children and young people, but also, and in particular, at raising awareness of the problem in the adult world (public administration, first responders, policy-makers, parents, teachers…). By sharing case studies and best practice, by recruiting allies and advocates, we’ve tried to show how strategic, productive and resilient it is for adults to listen to children and young people’s needs, ideas and suggestions.

However, as Hart (2008) also acknowledges, this focus on formal participation has its limitations. First, as said, it pays little attention to other important and more informal, playful, everyday grassroots
and horizontal forms of children’s participation. As we saw in some cases, there is a vast terrain to explore in these more informal forms of participation in disaster situations, particularly among peers and outside or beyond schools. Second, a focus on formal participation may reinforce, rather than challenge, the adult framework of influence and control that organises, but also limits, children’s formal participation. As some experts involved in the project noticed, formal participation is most effective, and trustworthy, when it works within a framework of co-production with children and young people. That is, when it goes beyond mere consultation, or moral recognition, and starts ‘listening to’ them, acknowledging, co-elaborating and thinking through their needs, rhythms and knowledge. But this is clearly a rare achievement. Formal participation tends to revolve around less participative, or even tokenistic, forms of engagement. We’d like to think that CUIDAR contributed to changing this by adding examples from different countries of more meaningful forms of engagement and by pointing to the need to go beyond regime-oriented ideas of participation. Actually, one of the lessons learned is that we need to explore further the crucial role of academia, schools, NGOs, international frameworks, emergency services and public administrations, among others, in reproducing adultist ideas of participation.

Similarly, CUIDAR has in some of its phases assumed a rather individualistic approach to participation. This is aligned with the very notion of human rights, and with Western cultural and legal frameworks based on modern ideas of the subject, autonomy, control and independence. However, it is important to note that this individualisation of agency and participation has its own limitations. Yet often, working with children during the project, participation and agency have manifested as much more collective, assembled and mediated processes. Without falling into collectivist romanticism, we argue that it is crucial to value collective forms of participation and critically reflect on the assumptions and normativities behind more mainstream (individualising) ideas of agency and participation. To return to the main limitations of the idea of ‘ladder’, Hart (2008) acknowledged the importance of the complex ‘scaffold’ of actors, abilities, supports and mediations that lie behind our forms of participation. This also involves rethinking the very idea of child-centred DRM we have used in the project as a way to encourage a rights-based approach to disasters. This can easily be understood to mean that children should, literally, lead or have the last word in issues that concern them. But this interpretation might contribute to strengthen rather than reduce the more individualised, hierarchical
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and even confrontational (between generations) approaches to participation. One of the lessons from CUIDAR, in contrast, is that participation must be understood as a collective achievement, as a diverse and inclusive understanding and assemblage of rights, voices and agencies, in which children are central but also in which adults play a very important role in creating and supporting conditions for meaningful participation and strategic action.

That said, we believe it is important to point out the empowering role of ideas of participation commonly articulated in international legal and political frameworks, notably the 
*Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030* and 1989 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Despite the problems mentioned above, these have allowed us to send a clear, simple and much needed message of recognition and respect for the political lives and capacities of children and young people. That’s also what Hart’s ladder provides, a simple framework through which we can easily show that there are ‘higher’ levels, rarely used, of participation that point to the full expression of children and young people’s rights (Hart, 2008). In political terms, these messages continue to be important and relevant, especially in areas that have not been amenable to participation, as is the case of DRM, since they allow us to table the need to democratise a domain excessively controlled by adult and expert power. Indeed, the acknowledgement of the right to participation has been essential to see children and young people as fellow citizens, and to refute the idea that rights are for ‘normal situations’ but not for periods of ‘exceptionality’. This latter argument systematically excludes those groups that, like children and young people, find it difficult to make their voices heard in disaster situations. Paradoxically, such ideas serve to increase the risk of these groups being disproportionately affected by a disaster, in the name of protecting them. This is, actually, what defines them as vulnerable. As we have learned through CUIDAR, vulnerable groups are those that are unequally exposed to risk, those that are excluded, silenced or marginalised from public and political life. In this context, the right to participate becomes a way to prevent patronising and stigmatising children as an affected group.

CUIDAR is a clear demonstration that working with children in participatory ways is not only possible but also fruitful. The methodology we developed was geared towards creating opportunities for participation, for listening to children, following their lead whenever possible, creating safe places for co-production with adult stakeholders. We demonstrated to policy-makers and responders that it was feasible to put into practice what we are advocating.
Talking about rights

We have made much in this book of children’s rights and the ways these rights can be made visible in order to start useful conversations with adults. But our work is more concerned with how such rights can be exercised in context and through processes of participation, how some of those rights may end up getting practised, particularly in emergencies. In the often very practical context of disaster risk reduction (DRR), civil protection and emergency planning (the occupations and functions are differently named from place to place), children’s participation implies a role in civil society itself. In this way participation is an expression of children’s citizenship based on practice and action, rather than theory or abstract rights, as also analysed by Larkins (2014) in her work with groups of children from marginalised communities in Wales and France. As we have seen, the UNCRC states that children have the right to be heard and actively participate in decision-making that affects their lives. However, our approach, along with that of James (2011) and Larkins (2014), shows an imperative to move beyond rehearsal of rights (useful though this is) to recognise that children’s actions, such as, for example, helping flooded neighbours in the street, are also acts of citizenship. Following the critique expressed by Milne (2013), we have not been concerned so much with children’s participation in ‘children’s issues’ but rather with the possibilities for their participation as citizens in a particular civil domain, and how this could and should come to be seen as the realisation of citizenship.

For us, children’s exclusion from this civil domain is connected with other forms of marginalisation in society itself, such as through disability, gender and ethnicity, because these affect adults and children and act to impoverish civil society itself. We know that children and young people take many forms of action in emergencies out of care and concern for their families and neighbourhoods, and they express a sense of social solidarity. We would argue that this constitutes living citizenship. Indeed, the insights and examples provided by children in this book help us to see what Baraldi and Cockburn (2018: 263) term ‘… lived citizenship and lived rights and lived participation, thereby eschewing the abstractions of citizenship, rights and participation.’

Talking about disasters

Relatedly, we believe that it was a wise move to open up the notion of disaster. We have worked with Blaikie et al’s (1994) influential evocation of slow disasters that unfold in myriad ways or which just
deny, through ongoing cycles of poverty and deprivation, the chances to live a healthy and fulfilled life. These slow disasters come in many forms but are nearly always exacerbated by lack of resources, social capital or the presence of forms of toxicity. It was important to join with others in debunking the myth that disasters are natural events, and to show how complex events, risks and hazards speak volumes about social inequality and neglect that cannot be dismissed. Assuming and making explicit that disasters are highly controversial events, we have also made explicit that the very definition of disaster is a matter of concern and controversy for different social groups. That's why, in contrast to more technocratic and expert-oriented approaches to disasters, CUIDAR is an invitation to collectivise and democratise disasters, incorporating and valuing a wider array of skills, voices and knowledges, and particularly those emanating from excluded and marginalised social groups. Our work with children and young people has shown that care and democracy, awareness, empathy and recognition, are central to reduce the risk of disasters and to lessen their capacity to intensify issues of inequality and neglect.

To take this argument a step further, securitas etymologically refers to what is secured, to the safety of something or someone. It refers to that which does not require care (or is free from care). Perhaps this explains why DRM, as a field within security studies and practice, has systematically prioritised notions of control, hierarchy and (national) sovereignty above notions of care, interdependence or vulnerability. This securitisation of risks, hazards and disasters has certainly contributed to strengthen a specific field of expertise and practice, but has also contributed to shrink public debate and more participative, inclusive and social justice-oriented framing of disasters. However, we believe that this situation is rapidly changing as societies and policy-makers are becoming aware of the limits of this securitised approach. We just need to think of the complexities, multiple controversies and crises unravelled by a tiny microorganism, COVID-19, to realise that it’s not possible to disentangle security from care. Rather presciently, disabled children in Greece drew our attention to how disruption of normal life, the impossibility of leaving the house to play or attend school, would be for them a disaster (see Chapter 3). So, at the time of writing, we can only imagine how difficult the mandatory confinement imposed due to the pandemic must be for them. So the same happens with earthquakes, chemical accidents, heat waves, flooding or wildfires. Contemporary challenges prove, probably more than ever, that we need to collectively rearticulate the field of DRM by rethinking disasters not just as a matter of security but also, as the
acronym of this project remarks, as a matter of care. That is, we need to pay attention to undervalued and minimised voices, opening up what counts as disaster, when, how and for whom, and try to understand the more interdependent and relational dimensions of disasters, risks and resilience.

**Talking about making a difference**

Through CUIDAR, we have witnessed many examples of meaningful exchange in different settings between children, young people and those whose job it is to plan for, respond to and recover from, emergencies. There is some evidence that these exchanges are resulting in altered policies and practices, for example:

‘Conclusions and recommendations by this project gave us important clues to better design new civil protection public policies … which contribute to abandon the old and exceeded view that considers children and youngsters solely as victims and passive recipients in need of support and assistance when disasters occur, to a new approach where this age group plays a central role in the prevention and mitigation efforts. Today … we are working hard to incorporate this new vision and approach in children’s education and public information frameworks, in order to increase preventive culture against risks and foster individual and collective resilience.’ (Jorge Dias, Head of Communication, National Authority for Civil Protection, Portugal)

‘… their voice was heard and taken into account in the different forums that the project made possible. That is why the balance about the impact of CUIDAR in the city of Lorca is more than positive, not only for developing work with youth for young people through participatory processes, but also for generating new spaces for structured dialogue between young people and politicians/service managers, thus reducing the “bureaucratic barriers” that sometimes arise.’ (Cristian Romeu Pérez, M13 Training Centre and Youth Resources, Lorca, Spain)

As Fothergill and Peek (2015) found in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, children need to be able to regain some control over their
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lives, personal and collective spaces. We have argued that in DRM and emergency planning, children can be seen as part of a solution, not the problem. We have also argued that the highly ordered and organised work of, for example, civil protection, needs to attend further to the chronic, as well as the acute, forms of disaster, issues such as living with risk and social vulnerability.

CUIDAR has shown that when the problem of overlooking children and young people, in terms of disaster policy and practice, is addressed, risk awareness, community preparation and resilience are improved across society. By engaging with specific user communities in each location, bringing together societal groups for the first time (for example, marginalised children and civil protection officials) for ground-breaking interactions, policy-makers, practitioners and planners started to see that children were not just vulnerable victims, but citizens with the capacity both to enhance community awareness and improve civil protection provision.

Finally: talking about stories

Looking back over the arrangement of the chapters in this book brings to mind the contribution of disaster sociologist Kai Erikson (1994) about the nature of time and storytelling: essentially that, in the field of disasters, the classic Aristotelian order of beginning, middle and end cease to make sense. For children who have experienced disaster, time may be measured by life before and after extreme events. But that form of measurement does not mean that the end of the story has been reached. The charity Children of Chernobyl brings groups of 7- to 12-year-olds from the contaminated zones within Ukraine/Belarus to the UK for a month each year to stay with host families and receive enhanced nutrition, healthcare and above all, a chance to ‘play out’. A similar programme has been running in Portugal since 2008, giving children respite from still prevalent radiation and the opportunity to enjoy playing on the beach. The 1986 disaster has a long, long tail.

But in this book there are other stories and timelines, from children who live in risky places, or risky situations, and who want to take part in making their places and neighbourhoods safer, who want to join with adults in creating emergency plans and to realise their citizenship in ways up to now mostly denied to them. Our CUIDAR Framework tries to capture ways in which this can be made to happen, but again, it does not have a beginning, middle and an end. As we have discussed, it is not something linear, but it is a process that actors can enter at any point and move in different directions. CUIDAR
as a whole can be seen through its Framework to promote further children’s participation, but it can also more generally be seen as a way to encourage a more democratic, collective and interdependent way of understanding and promoting cultures of disaster resilience.