

The Role of Children in Creating Culturally Sensitive Disaster Management

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Children are often ignored in the adult-centered world of emergency planning, disaster management, and policy development. Yet young people are greatly affected by disasters that are often created or exacerbated by adults. Our work in the United Kingdom and across Europe has shown that not only are children affected in particular ways, they also *affect* what is happening and have capacities that can be overlooked by officials. They are active citizens who can contribute to improving disaster planning and management.

Context

At a time when young people are leading the way in raising the awareness of climate change as an unfolding disaster, public health practitioners can use the powerful ideas and testimonies of children who have experienced emergencies to enhance community resilience. Such insights can be used to inspire intergenerational and cross-cultural resilience work, as well as support children in shaping how their own communities adapt to living with disaster.

Our research interventions

Working within a multidisciplinary team, we have been researching with children as active citizens in a series of in depth qualitative studies of disaster recovery and resilience. In one project, a collaboration between Lancaster University and Save the Children, we used [creative arts and theatre methods](#) to help flood-affected children in the UK communicate their ideas to policymakers. Then, picking up this approach in [our European project, CUIDAR](#), children in Italy, Spain, UK, Portugal, and Greece contributed to a framework to promote culturally sensitive disaster planning in the changing and increasingly diverse context of emergencies (*Cuidar* means take care in three partner languages). We also partnered with Fukushima Medical University to explore the ideas of local children on building community resilience after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The groups of urban and rural flood-affected children and young people in the UK articulated their difficult experiences through a process of “walking and talking” (photo-elicitation), model making, and theatre. They then drew up [Flood Manifestos](#), a series of measures they proposed as necessary to improve flood recovery and resilience and presented them directly to policymakers and practitioners at a series of stakeholder events. The children participating in the CUIDAR project in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, and the UK, first identified and then researched the risks they perceived in their localities. This previous work facilitated important dialogues with practitioners and policymakers in a series of [Mutual Learning Exercises](#) where the power relations between adult decision makers and children could be carefully and productively balanced. In Japan, the children created theater performances that showed what they liked about their communities and the changes they would like to see. This work has led to the development of a training program for teachers and public health practitioners about the ways participatory methods can convey children’s perspectives in education and community development.

Origins of this work

Our previous UK flood recovery research, dating back to 2007, indicated that [children and young people](#) were excluded from preparation, adaptation, and resilience, yet there was evidence that their lives were severely affected, especially if they were evacuated from their home. We conducted

[a scoping and review exercise for the European study](#) that evaluated policies, practices and programs related to children's involvement in disaster management in each country, as well as national and EU-funded projects and the scientific literature. This showed that only about 20% of projects, programs or research in disaster management could be said to involve children in any way. In addition, awareness of children's rights, in particular Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is very low among emergency planners/civil protection/teachers/resilience professionals.

Resources for practice developed from our research

Working with children we created [a game called Flood Snakes & Ladders](#) that allows adult practitioners to walk in the shoes of disaster-affected children and thereby inform their policies and practices. This game can also be played with students to learn about the effects of flooding on young people and inspire thinking about better flood preparedness. Another resource, the [Flood Suitcase workshop program](#), is based on the creative methods used during our UK research. It is designed to support younger children to share their experiences within in a safe and supportive space and use these insights to contribute to better flood resilience in their school and community. These tools all draw on a participatory, child-centered approach that aims to make young voices central to disaster planning. This is [detailed further in the CUIDAR Framework Report](#) that can be used to rethink and redesign policy. We have run workshops and training using these tools for school staff, trainee teachers, public health professionals, children's charity workers, high-level policymakers and flood risk, insurance, and emergency management practitioners.

As with many social movements, the interventions young people are making in disaster management end up benefiting the whole of society. In the projects discussed here, they have resulted in clearer plans, more accessible communication tools, and a more humanitarian approach to disaster recovery.

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