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The Role of Children in Adapting to Climate Change

Children's voices on disaster risk reduction (DRR) have been sidelined by disaster management and relief efforts targeted at adults. The latest collaborative research by IDS and Plan International addresses this imbalance. It examines how children's views can be heard within different policy spaces and challenges assumptions about their lack of agency. Understanding the benefits of child-centred DRR approaches is informing further research into the role children might play in addressing the multiple threats to their futures posed by climate change.

Children are commonly seen as passive victims, with no role to play in reducing the risk of disasters. This is often based on an assumption that adults are fully attuned to the short and long-term needs of their families. Research supporting Plan International's child-centred DRR programme in the Philippines and El Salvador is challenging these common perceptions. It asks what opportunities exist for children's voices regarding DRR to be heard at household, community and national levels and how effectively they can influence decision-making. The research hypothesis is that children in fact possess exclusive skills and qualities particularly suited to advocating for DRR.

Plan International's work with child and youth volunteers on community risk mapping and mitigation activities has shown that children and youth have much greater capacity to participate in DRR than many people assume. As climate change is likely to increase the frequency and magnitude of disasters and create new patterns of employment and migration, the research into the benefits

of child-centred DRR has given rise to a new IDS-led programme entitled Children in a Changing Climate.

Child-centred approaches

The research fits within development discourses concerning children's voices:

- Theories of 'child and youth participation' suggest that children are motivated to participate if they believe in their ability to effect change, and have sufficient knowledge of an issue and a degree of self-worth and confidence.
- External facilitation through targeted programmes and institutions can bolster child and youth participation, providing facilitators recognise children's agency and possess appropriate tools to enable active participation.
- A number of provisions exist in international law to safeguard child rights in the context of disasters, including rights to safety, good health and disaster relief, as well as participatory rights such as access to information and freedom of expression.

Pathways to influencing disaster risk reduction

Plan International's child-centred DRR programmes have been particularly effective in building children's confidence to articulate risk and participate in DRR interventions in a number of ways. Research has helped to understand both the formal and informal channels children tend to use when articulating risk, fears, ideas and their perceived spheres of influence. For instance, children are more likely to discuss concerns with their mothers than with their fathers and feel they have more influence over the people closest to them. Children have also benefited from programmes facilitating access to more formal communication channels such as theatre or the media.

Plan International's child-centred DRR programmes have resulted in examples of concrete actions with tangible changes being observed at the household and community level. For example, school children in Southern Leyte in the Philippines won a community-wide referendum to relocate their school to a safe location away from a landslide zone.

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“ School children in Southern Leyte in the Philippines won a community-wide referendum to relocate their school to a safe location. ”



Tom Mitchell

Demonstrating their capacity to communicate risk, they led the campaign against the wishes of many of their parents and the wider community. The school has since been rebuilt with the support of Plan International, and was inaugurated in June 2007.

However, many barriers to youth and children's voices on DRR being heard in policy spaces remain, including a limited awareness of the benefits of a DRR approach, a lack of resources, capacity and time constraints, cultural barriers and paternalistic beliefs. Accordingly child-centred DRR programmes must embark on long-term advocacy engagement, not only with children and young people, but also with politicians, emergency managers, other NGOs, community leaders and families.

Children's voices in a changing climate

This research has indicated how young people have a greater capacity than most adults to perceive low probability-high consequence risk, as well as an ability to articulate necessary responses to such

risks. Further research is underway to explore how these capabilities can inform and benefit climate change adaptation approaches.

The Children in a Changing Climate research programme comprises six thematic areas to explore children's potential role and agency in tackling climate change impacts:

- Children's voices and participation in policy and decision-making
- Children's roles as communicators of climate and disaster risk
- Children's futures in a changing climate
- Children's perceptions and knowledge of climate change
- Child rights in climate and disaster governance
- The opportunities post disasters to engage young people on climate change and disaster issues.

Further Reading

Tom Mitchell et al. (Forthcoming 2008) 'The role of children and youth in communicating disaster risk'. *Children, Youth and Environments*

Tom Mitchell, Tomas Tanner and Katharine Haynes (Forthcoming 2008) *Children's voices for disaster risk reduction: lessons from El Salvador and the Philippines*. IDS Working Paper, Brighton: IDS

Credits

This In Focus was written by and **Tom Mitchell** and **Katharine Haynes** and edited by **Guy Collender** and **Emily Polack**. This research has been conducted in collaboration with Plan International, RMIT University and Risk Frontiers. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the other institutions involved.

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