

# IDS IN FOCUS POLICY BRIEFING

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CHILDREN IN A CHANGING CLIMATE:  
LESSONS FROM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE  
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## Children Communicating Climate and Disaster Risks

There is growing evidence of the ability of children to act as protagonists for action to reduce climate and disaster risks in their communities. Children have a unique perception of these risks, combining external information with their own experiences. They are also able to communicate these perceptions of risk to others to bring about changes in behaviour that will reduce risks and vulnerabilities. An improved understanding of these processes is essential to make policies and programmes sensitive to children's needs and to create enabling environments for their participation and agency.

Children commonly make up over half of the population of any community, yet their voices are seldom heard or their views taken into account. To date the policies and practices of disaster management and climate change adaptation have mainly targeted the needs of adults. Adults are generally assumed to be attuned to the needs of their families and the wider community, and to act harmoniously to meet these interests. Meanwhile, children are often depicted only as victims of disaster events and climate change impacts.

Recent research challenges these dominant perspectives by asking:

- How do children experience and conceptualise climate and disaster risks?
- How do children communicate these risks to others, take action, change behaviour and reduce risks?
- What does this understanding tell us for improving adaptation and disasters policy and practice?

Findings confirm the importance of making both children's needs and participation central in planning and action for disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation at community level to ensure their success.

### Children have a unique view of the risks affecting their lives

No-one has a more valuable understanding of the risks facing the lives of children in developing countries than the children themselves. They are acutely aware of the broad spectrum of risks they face including those deriving from human-induced vulnerability and societal risks such as drug and alcohol abuse, which can be as important as those related to natural hazards such as changing rainfall.

### Innovative risk communication tools: Murals, theatre and participatory video

Children are enthusiastic pioneers of innovative risk communication tools. Both participatory video and theatre groups have proved effective for stimulating local research and advocacy for children's groups. They have provided vehicles for tackling barriers to climate and disaster resilience at multiple scales, from local to international (see *IDS In Focus Policy Briefing 13.6*). Local murals have also provided a means of informing and advocating change within communities, targeting both peer groups within schools and the wider community.

### Children have the potential to be agents of change

Examples from across children's groups demonstrate children's ability to identify, discuss, analyse and prioritise actions, facilitated by common tools that assess community-level vulnerability, capacity and risk. A growing range of examples show how children have followed this by initiating risk reduction activities including actions that require varying degrees of engagement with others (see Table 1 over page). Children's participation includes their role as direct protagonists but also as catalysts for collective action and behavioural change in others.

Promoting child participation does not remove the burden of responsibility for action from adults, who must support the creation of an enabling environment for children to participate and voice their perceptions and opinions. Research shows how communication and interaction with other members of the community is crucial to creating the active support and behavioural changes that reduce climate and disaster risks.

# Children Communicating Climate and Disaster Risks

Table 1: A Typology of Child-led DRR and Adaptation Activities

Type	Characteristics	Examples from El Salvador and the Philippines
Change	Can be successfully undertaken by children's groups with relative autonomy	Mangrove reforestation projects Earthquake and cyclone preparedness drills Removal of large stones above school buildings Planting hill slope stabilising plants to prevent landslides
Influence	Require behavioural change by other members of the community	Advocacy and protests over quarrying of river beds Identifying high risk structures and discussing reinforcement with owners Banning artisanal mining near the community to reduce contamination and flood risk Awareness campaigns and provision of communal waste disposal
Transform	Require significant intervention from beyond community boundaries	Effective enforcement of laws on illegal logging or riverbed mining Development of alternative livelihoods that reduce the drivers of climate vulnerability Structural changes to key infrastructure such as schools and roads Cultural changes to behaviour, such as waste disposal or hygiene

## Children co-construct the knowledge underlying risk communication

The research demonstrates children's pivotal position in many communities due to their growing access to information from school, media, information technology and training workshops. They are also often more conscious of the implications of wider scale processes, such as global climate change, than adults.

Children's knowledge and actions challenge orthodox models of risk communication, in which experts inform the public on risks and recommend responses. Instead children 'co-construct' the knowledge needed to communicate risk by placing external information within their own reality.

## Further reading

For other briefs in this series see: [www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13)

Tanner T.M. *et al.* (2009) 'Children's multiple modes of participation in community based disaster risk reduction and adaptation to climate change' *Participatory Learning and Action* 60

Mitchell, T., Tanner, T. and Haynes, K. (2009) *Children as agents of change for Disaster Risk Reduction: Lessons from El Salvador and the Philippines*. 'Children in a Changing Climate' Working Paper 1, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies  
[www.childreninachangingclimate.org/docs/CCC\\_Working%20Paper\\_Final1\\_Screen.pdf](http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org/docs/CCC_Working%20Paper_Final1_Screen.pdf)

Mitchell T, *et al.* (2008) The Role of Children and Youth in Communicating Disaster Risk. *Children, Youth and Environments* 18(1): 254-279  
[www.childreninachangingclimate.org/docs/CYE\\_CommunicatingRisk.pdf](http://www.childreninachangingclimate.org/docs/CYE_CommunicatingRisk.pdf)

## Policy implications

- DRR, adaptation and mitigation policies and programmes require a much greater focus on the needs of children. To do so, they need to be grounded on children's own perceptions, opinions and experiences.
- Adults in the community and organisations working on climate change adaptation and DRR should create enabling environments where children are able to conceive, initiate and lead actions that reduce risks and adapt to a changing climate – integrating children and adults into collective action.
- Improving the ability of children to extend their voice beyond community boundaries, including by developing networks, exchanges, forums and use of the internet to support their advocacy will contribute to more effective climate change adaptation and DRR policies and programmes.
- Children's adaptation needs and spaces for child participation must be prioritised in international frameworks such as the deliberations of the UNFCCC and Global Platforms for DRR, including in financial flows and reporting mechanisms.

## Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by **Thomas Tanner**, a Research Fellow in IDS Climate Change and Development Centre.

The series editors are **Marion Khamis** and **Joanna Glyde**. For other briefs in this series see: [www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13](http://www.ids.ac.uk/go/infocus13)

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