

Adults' Attitudes towards Children's Participation in Disaster Risk Management in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study investigated how adults view children's participation in disaster risk management. Using a phenomenological approach, this study explored parents' (n=8) and key informants' (n=10) views on children's participation in disaster risk management in Chadereka Ward of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe. Results indicated that adults in Chadereka viewed children's participation as asking questions, listening to children, and building rapport with them. These findings revealed that the concept of children's participation in disaster risk management in this context is complex and poorly understood. Although parents acknowledged that they rarely consulted children, the main reasons were related to community and family values: children's well-being was assumed to be their parents' responsibility, and adults assumed that children did not have enough experience with disasters to have much to share with the community. Changing adults' perspectives and facilitating children's participation in disaster risk management requires a common understanding of the importance of involving children in issues that affect their lives.

Keywords: children's participation, disaster risk management, adult perceptions, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Children's vulnerability in disasters can be reduced and their resilience enhanced when they have access to resources and information, are encouraged to participate in disaster preparedness and response activities, and can access personal and communal support (Peek, 2008). Given the chance to participate in disaster risk management, this paper suggests that children can contribute greatly before, during, and after disaster events. Furthermore, in developing countries, children take the responsibility of doing household chores and contributing to agricultural work (Liebel & Saadi, 2010), yet it remains difficult for many organizations and societies to fully accept that children can take responsibilities in disaster risk management. Lansdown (2010) also notes that children's rights to negotiate their contributions are highly restricted. As a result, many projects do not succeed because children are treated as bystanders rather than active participants (Roshani, 1997). Therefore, for participation to be effective, it must become embedded in institutions and processes that influence children's everyday lives (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & Mclaughlin, 2003).

The introduction of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989 challenged the way in which children were treated. The UNCRC is concerned with the protection and promotion of children's rights and welfare. According to Hodgkin and Newell (2007) and Wyatt and colleagues (2010), children's participation is safeguarded in a number of articles of the UNCRC.

By ratifying the UNCRC, Zimbabwe committed itself to promote, protect and fulfill the rights of children (Mushongera, 2015). However, questions remain around the extent to which the right to child participation has been transposed by adults and stakeholders who work with children in disaster risk management in Zimbabwe. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore how adults view children's participation in disaster risk management. This is because adults' construction of childhood has a major influence on the extent to which children are heard and how much their views are taken into account.

Literature Review

Disaster Risk Management and Children's Participation

The concept of participation is contested, broad and not clearly defined (Fleming, 2012). Most definitions of participation suggest that children's participation could also be an end in itself (Mitchell et al., 2009; Martin, 2010). Kirby and colleagues (2003) noted that meaningful participation must be seen as a process not simply an isolated activity or event. Naker (2007) also supports this by defining it as not an end but a means to an end where empowerment is the outcome. He went on to argue that participation should be seen as a continuum, emphasizing it as a process, rather than just the outcome. This implies that at one end there is information sharing and at the other, empowerment. In this case, children's participation is about sharing information so that marginalized groups can also be empowered at the end of the process. Thus, children's participation should not be about selecting or inviting a few children to represent others, but should contribute to realizing development, survival and protection (Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006).

Although children's "participation is not a replacement for adult responsibility, empowering children through their participation is an important protection strategy," as well as a right (Save the Children, 2006, p. 2). Children's participation in disaster risk management would ensure their safety. This is supported by Plan International (2010), arguing that participation and involvement in disaster risk management fosters the agency of children to work towards making their lives safer and their communities more resilient. Because children are the most vulnerable group during disasters, they need to be encouraged and motivated to participate in making the world a safer place to live.

Children's participation in disaster risk management empowers them to make informed decisions concerning the risks of disasters. Though investing in child-focused disaster risk management is a long-term process, it creates a generation that is better prepared for the disasters of tomorrow. Apart from empowerment of children through disaster risk management, their involvement contributes to the realization of their rights. This was also supported by Mitchell and colleagues (2008), who pointed out that the approach also recognizes children as key actors in their own development and in their communities. Children's participation in disaster risk management is also an entry point for programs aiming at promoting sustainable development and children's rights. However, the question that arises is how adults view children's participation in disaster risk management and its implications on community resilience.

Conceptualizations of Childhood

Conceptualizations of childhood inform the way people think about, speak and interact with children. Zigler and Finn-Stevenson (1987) argue that the way childhood is conceptualized is reflected in the way children are treated, in the concerns that we have for them, and in the policies that are created for their benefit. As such, the value the society places on the childhood stage is diverse, and the concept of childhood is not universally defined (McAdam-Crisp, 2006).

There are two dominant discourses in the construction of childhood. First is a Dionysian perspective that implies that children enter the world with a bias towards "evil" (Lopez et al., 2012). In this view children lack self-control and are insensitive to other people's needs. From the Dionysian perspective, children need to be strictly controlled, regulated and disciplined (Lopez et al., 2012). The second discourse is the Apollonian perspective, which views children as innocent and born "good" (Lopez et al., 2012). Apollonian perspectives have emphasized the provision of children's identified needs. Seeing children through the "lens of citizenship," rather than as welfare dependent, could present a different picture in which children's strengths and competencies are recognized and their experiences and interactions are considered (Willow et al., 2003). The Apollonian perspective tends to socialize children into particular ways of being and strongly influence the patterns of participation (Percy-smith & Thomas, 2010). Therefore, there is a need to understand childhood construction from cultural values and local contexts (Invernizzi, 2003) and how this can influence children's participation in disaster risk management.

The Study Area

This study was carried out in the Chadereka Ward of the Muzarabani District of Zimbabwe along the floodplains of the Zambezi River, at the confluence of the Musengezi and Zambezi rivers about 400m above sea level, with Lake Kariba upstream and Cabora Basa downstream. The area forms the foot of an escarpment stretching from the east to the west of northern Zimbabwe. The study area is in the semi-arid and northern low-veldt of Zimbabwe in agro-ecological zone IV, which is characterized by little rainfall—ranging between 450 to 600mm per annum. Thus, the area is prone to seasonal droughts and severe dry spells during the summer months (Campbell, 1994; Murwira et al., 2012). Temperatures are excessively high (up to 40°C during the hot season – September to November), creating a suitable environment for mosquito breeding, thus making the area prone to malaria. Chadereka Ward is 60 km from the Muzarabani Business Centre, and currently is home to 7,505 people (Zimstat, 2012) with about 1,500 households.

Moreover, being located in the flood plain of Zambezi River, Chadereka Ward also experiences occasional floods (Murwira et al., 2012). The area is normally flooded from January to the end of the rainy season in March. The floods are mainly caused by localized heavy seasonal rainfall and run-off, which often results in rivers overflowing. Chingombe and colleagues (2015) explained that the discharge from Mavhuradona range is drained and propelled as a runoff wave that upon reaching the alluvial fans spreads out and fills the low-lying area, thereby leading to flash floods. They further reported that the plain has a very small terrain variation, hence bankful discharge is easily attained and the plain makes flooding of the area a very easy task for the river. Cyclones like those of February 2000 (Cyclone Eline) and March 2003 (Cyclone Japhet) are also responsible for flooding. The climate extremes (floods and droughts) can also contribute to the outbreak of diseases like cholera and malaria, as heavy rains tend to cause contamination of safe water contributing to disease outbreaks.

Methodology

Most data on children's lives is obtained from adults, and this paper similarly focuses on adult views and experiences as they are significant in children's lives. The decision to focus this study on adults is also grounded in the notion that experiences are embedded in socio-economic and political contexts, which include adult-child power relations (Christensen & Prout, 2002). It is also important to consider the perceptions of the people that the children are surrounded by in order to get a better understanding of their situation. However, children's views in the same study area were captured in other research, e.g. Mudavanhu et al. (2015) and Mudavanhu and Bongo (2015). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore parents and stakeholders' perspectives on children's participation in disaster risk management. This paper comes from the author's doctoral dissertation, entitled: *Reframing Children's Participation in Flood Risk Management: The Case of Chadereka Ward, Muzarabani District, Zimbabwe*.

This study used a qualitative research approach to explore adults' attitude towards children's participation in disaster risk management. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with parents and other key stakeholders working with

children in the study area. A total of 18 participants participated in this study: eight parents formed the first study population and 10 stakeholders (key informants) formed the second group.

To identify the study population, the researcher identified the schools in the area. There were a total of 11 schools, and although they were all in the lowland, field observations indicated that their vulnerability to disasters was different. Four schools were directly affected by floods while others showing no signs of flood impacts; the four flood-impacted schools in Chadereka were selected to participate in the study.

The parents who participated in this study were school development committee (SDC) members. The researcher interviewed two SDC members from each of the identified schools. The interview themes included adults' understanding of children's participation, their knowledge of children's rights to participate and to be consulted, policies/strategies/plans in place to ensure that children's views were listened to, adults' perception of children's vulnerabilities, and the role of children in disaster risk management. Using semi-structured interviews allowed greater flexibility within the interview to allow the respondents to express their thoughts on a subject freely, and enabled the researcher to probe further whenever necessary.

Additionally, the study included key informant interviews with officials responsible for coordinating child-related disaster work in Muzarabani. The researcher conducted a total of 10 key informant interviews: four head/senior teachers from the four selected schools, two officers of non-governmental organizations; and one each with a ward councilor, a chief, a nursing sister employed by the Ministry of Health, and the assistant to the district administrator for Muzarabani. Only those NGOs that were directly involved in the welfare of children and were working in Muzarabani during the time of the study participated. Stakeholder interviews sought to describe the ways in which children were involved in disaster risk management activities from an informed point of view and how these adults viewed children's right to participate.

The researcher adhered to research ethics that enshrine respect for, and sensitivity to, respondents. The research procedures were clearly communicated to all participants and their concerns were addressed. All participants were advised of their rights to withdraw or refuse to participate in the research at any stage. The following principles were key in guiding field work: informed consent, inclusion, participation, and fair power relations.

The researcher manually analyzed data following the inductive analytic approach. All the interview transcripts were organized and read to capture the main themes that were emerging. The transcripts were then coded by writing comments on the margin that were then compiled into sub-themes. The topics were grouped according to their meanings and codes were assigned, followed by the expansion of the subthemes into the broader themes. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the reviewed literature.

Findings

Parents' Views on Disasters

Before assessing parents' views about children's participation in disaster risk management, it was important to more generally understand how the community views the hazards they face. Although the extreme climatic conditions (floods and droughts) create a fragile economy characterized by hunger and famine, adults who participated in the study viewed the extreme climatic conditions as normal and part of their lives. Parents reported that the community had preferred to take the risk of farming in the disaster zone to improve food security, but this location makes farmers more vulnerable to disasters. Participants viewed flood disasters as an advantage because they tend to attract donors. During every disaster period, nongovernmental organizations assist local farm communities with basic food items, clothing, and blankets. Development projects were also initiated so that communities can recover from flood impacts. This has also created such a donor syndrome in the community that some people do not want to be relocated because they expect to benefit from donor aid when the next flood occurs. Apart from attracting donors, floods have brought fertile soils suitable for maize production. Households grow food crops on the floodplain during the dry season based on the residual soil moisture from flooding (locally known as *mudzedze*). *Mudzedze* land is said to provide yields that are two to three times greater than those of large-scale farms. However, floodplain cultivation has the disadvantage of contributing to heavy siltation of rivers and dams downstream, leading to increased flooding downstream.

Parents agreed that disasters were affecting the development of the community and future of their children. The impacts of disasters among children included missing and dropping out of school, and loss of qualified personnel, among others. Assessing parents' views about disasters and their impacts on children helped to understand how the adults were involving children in disaster risk management to reduce their vulnerabilities and that of their communities.

Parents' Views on Children's Participation in Disaster Risk Management

One way of focusing on parents' assumptions and experiences of involving children in disaster risk management was to explore the opportunities provided for children to express their views, the opportunities for children's views to be listened to, and how children's views have been acted upon during emergencies.

Although parents acknowledged the labor provided by children, parents' frequency of consulting children during emergencies was low (Table 1).

Table 1. Parents' frequency of consulting children

Description of parents' frequency of consultation	Frequency
Never, it is a matter between us adults	1
Rarely, when it is necessary in order to solve problems	5
Often, because I believe it is the best way to solve a problem	2
Total	8

The results in Table 1 indicate that all of the parents do not always consult the children during emergencies. Interestingly, almost all the parents believed that children should be consulted when it is necessary in order to solve problems. Only one parent never consulted their children, as they thought disaster issues were a matter between adults. They considered the issues to be too complex for their young children.

However, although parents acknowledged that they rarely consulted children, the main reasons for not consulting with them were not related to the rights of the child. Instead, these were related to community and family values. Common statements among participants included:

As parents we need to train our children so that they will be able to work for themselves and their children in future. We need to train them. There is also a lot of work that needs to be done in the home. Without the assistance of children we will not do much.

—Male, aged 47

Adults acknowledged that, in general, most of the labor was provided by children because the parents were either busy with other household duties or other community and family expectations. Some parents stated that they were too old to run around, for example, gathering wild fruits or herding cattle. Thus, children were doing most of the household duties in response to a specific need. This was confirmed by Save the Children (2010) who reported that opportunities for children to participate are created not as a natural step to realize their right to participation but because of the passion of individuals or in response to a specific localized problem.

While most of the parents agreed that theoretically the participation of children was important, their motivations to consult children differed (Table 2).

Table 2. Parents' reasons for involving children in disaster risk management

Reason	Frequency, n=8 (multiple responses)
Family benefit	8
Personal belief to involve everyone	7
Community values	6
Benefit the child	3

There were multiple responses with all respondents agreeing that generally children were taking part in household chores for family benefit even when there is no disaster (Table 2). None of the respondents reported that children were participating as part of government policy, rights of the child or as a demand from the children. This would mean that either parents were not aware of the policies or they were not giving children the chance to express their views. When asked about the policy that supports children's participation in disaster risk management, all parents indicated that they were not aware of the policies and agreed that they

were not really giving children an opportunity to express their views even if they provided most of the labor in most household chores.

Stakeholders' Views of Children's Participation

Although the stakeholders, because of their jobs, were expected to know about children's participation, they did not identify any one approach that they took when working with children but rather gave a range. They described their practices as individualized depending on the child's circumstances. The stakeholders described participation as asking questions, listening and building rapport with the child.

Seeking to understand the child is important when dealing with issues that affect children. Of the 10 stakeholder participants, seven believed that as children experience trauma related to flooding they need someone to talk to. However, because of the local culture that expects children to listen, the participants argued that asking questions was one of the important aspects of children's participation. In this way an adult will try to find out what the child is going through and what they are thinking about the situation. Questioning children could help them to open up and express their views to the adults. An example was given in cases of child abuse. Additionally, the participants believed that observing a child's behavior can help an adult get to know what that child is thinking, which can help to address some of the risks they are facing.

The excerpts below indicate that the stakeholders believe that asking questions would help children to express their views, especially in situations where children may fail to initiate a conversation with an adult.

As children are experiencing disasters, adults should take time to ask children how they feel, what they're going through and what they are thinking about the situation. Children rarely suggest they need to be asked.

—NGO 1, Field Officer

If you don't ask children they will not say anything. We've had a case where a child was raped but didn't report the case [to the police]. When the teacher noticed the child's change in behavior she asked the child. At first she [the girl] didn't disclose anything, but as the teacher insisted the child narrated her story. Somehow the child was helped [as the case was reported to the police].

—School D, teacher

Building rapport with children is one of the ways of facilitating participation. The way some adults talk makes children become passive even if they have something to contribute. Interviews with stakeholders recorded that children's participation is when adults talk to children in a friendly way so that they can understand each other. By building rapport with the child, the adult will be in a position to discuss the child's views with them, as highlighted by one of the head teachers:

As adults we need to develop an atmosphere of discussion with the children. If the children recognize that you respect their views they will express

themselves freely. Children can talk, depending on their age they can express themselves well either verbally or non-verbally.

—School A, Head teacher

Listening to children's experiences and views is one way for them to participate. Stakeholders believed that they should make decisions on issues concerning the children based on the information the children provide. The children can express their views verbally or non-verbally; for example:

A child could frown when an adult suggests something. Instead of beating the child, one should understand why the child frowned. When you listen to the child you could hear his side of the story.

—NGO 2, Field Officer

Children have their own challenges which may be different from adults', but one can only come to understand when you take time to listen to what the child is saying.

—School D, Head-teacher

Thus, giving a child an ear could facilitate children's participation and their vulnerabilities to disasters can be correctly addressed.

However, although the stakeholders tried to define children's participation more or less similarly to the UNCRC's concept, the issue of influence was not mentioned by any of the participants. Stakeholders' view of children's participation included giving children space, voice and audience—but without influence. This could imply that in many cases, although children express their views, they do not influence decision making. The next section considers in more depth the strategies employed by stakeholders to ensure that children's views are considered when dealing with disasters.

Stakeholders' Experiences of Children's Participation

The study established that organizations employ different strategies when dealing with children. There was evidence of programs where children were involved either in disaster risk awareness or response. Children's participation in disaster risk awareness was evidenced by stakeholders' extracts presented below.

These quotes illustrate that stakeholders involve children in communicating risks to the community. This evidenced that children had the capacity to communicate effectively on risk and risk reduction to the wider community. These results indicate that when given access to disaster information, children can assist in risk awareness. Children distributed disaster-related materials, such as pamphlets and flyers, to educate the community. This confirms Lopez and colleagues' (2012) report that children can interpret and relay messages to communities. Furthermore, teachers expressed a strong commitment to children's participation. Teachers indicated that they provided and raised awareness among their pupils, for example, by running sessions on what disasters are, what they do, and what can be done to reduce the impacts.

We do awareness campaigns every year just before the rainy season in all the surrounding schools to make sure that children have the information about the disaster risks. Sometimes we give them pamphlets to share with their families, or we spend time talking to them about disasters.

—Assistant DA

We get most information from the school children. It is easier for organizations to pass messages through the children because they get to every part of the community.

—School C, teacher

Every year before the rainy season we announce to children to avoid crossing flooded rivers, herding cattle near rivers and streams and to be always home in case of heavy rains. We also teach them to report any incidences of sickness or missing persons.

—School A, head teacher

Usually before the rainy season we visit surrounding schools to alert them about the impending disasters such as cholera, malaria and floods. We normally have a session of about 15 minutes with the children. We also encourage the children to take the messages to the community.

—Nurse

Furthermore, children participated in school rehabilitation and maintenance. The teachers revealed that children were the ones involved in cleaning the schools after the flood event. One of the school head teachers mentioned that they had asked the children to come and help to fetch water and river sand for the reconstruction of a classroom block and the toilets. Stakeholders also indicated incidences where children participated in food-for-work programs that concentrated on gully reclamation and road maintenance, among other projects.

The other notable activity for children by the stakeholders was the provision of relief aid. The NGOs provided food, clothing and shelter for the families that were affected. Books and in some cases school uniforms were provided to children who lost almost all of their belongings. School-based feeding schemes were also facilitated by the NGOs to cater for children who were coming to school on an empty stomach after the flood period. However, these were relief aids and there was limited children's participation. Children provided labor in off-loading food stuffs and assisted their parents with carrying the food home.

We do a lot of activities to help children affected by disasters. We normally come in when the president declares a disaster...and support children with food stuffs, school uniforms and books. In extreme cases we help in school rehabilitation...However, there is minimum participation of children because we will be trying to manage crisis.

—NGO 2, field officer

Conclusion

The general picture that emerged from this study was that although children were engaged and provided labor in most household activities, their capacity to participate in the disaster risk management process was undermined. This supports Boyden and colleagues' (1998) argument that in less-developed societies children are expected to work and are assigned responsibilities as part of their growing up. More emphasis is placed on children's participation in work as an integral part of their childhoods and socialization into responsible adulthood (Togunde & Carter, 2006; Hope, 2005)—not as their right. Although agencies seem to address children's needs, very few have effective experience in including children in a full participation process. Children in Muzarabani demonstrated that they had the knowledge to be full participants, as they were transmitting risk messages to the community, but were considered as passive victims with nothing to offer to the community. This is similar to Campbell et al.'s (2009) findings in South Africa that when young people did try to speak up, adults did not want them to be involved in community thinking as they were perceived to have nothing to offer. However, this conflicted with Wachtendorf et al. (2008), who argued in their research findings from the U.S. that children are presented as knowledgeable actors with the capacity to survive the physical impacts of disasters and participate in educating others in their community. This could be attributed to a tendency of humanitarian workers perceiving children and their communities in the developing world as passive, vulnerable victims in need of external assistance, rather than as people with knowledge and strengths (Wachtendorf et al., 2008). This concurs with Seck's (2007) conclusions that disasters have traditionally been associated with humanitarian assistance. The provision of relief services without investing in long-term disaster risk management makes it difficult for children to realize their participation rights in Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, the way childhood was conceptualized had an impact on the ability of children to participate. Some view children as dependents while others view them as young citizens. Seeing children through the "lens of citizenship," rather than as welfare dependent, gives a different picture where young people's strengths and competencies are recognized and their experiences and interactions are considered (Willow et al., 2003).

Adults' conceptualizations of childhood influence children's participation in disaster risk management. Children are socialized into particular ways of being that strongly influence the patterns of participation made available to them (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). Despite Zimbabwe being a signatory to the UNCRC advocating for the rights of the child, children were seen more as objects than competent actors in society. Children were strictly controlled, regulated and disciplined. The commitment and support of parents for children's participation was low. Decisions including those that affect the wellbeing of children were the domain of adults. Adults believed that it was their duty to shield and protect children from hazardous events, and some believed that involving children in flood risk management issues would put the children under pressure.

The lack of children's voices may imply that their specific vulnerabilities to floods have not been correctly addressed and solutions imposed on them may have inadequacies. Therefore, facilitating children's participation in disaster risk management requires a common understanding of the importance of involving children in issues that affect their lives. There is also need for adults to view children as rights holders and active participants. This can be achieved through formal and informal community education and awareness campaigns on the child's right to participation.

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