

I. The concept of vulnerability — Identifying vulnerable communities

Reversing the spiral of vulnerability

by Jacques Forster

Introduction

What can be done to counter the innumerable attacks on human dignity? This vexing question is today a global issue. Over the past 75 years — ever since the founding of the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation — it has given rise to increasing concern. Indeed, the history of our century, with its seemingly endless succession of wars and economic crises, has furnished constant reminders of its urgency. The problem is currently taking on a new dimension in many States and international organizations, and it is in this context that “improving the situation of the most vulnerable”,¹ the strategic aim of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, should be situated.

Periodic assessments by the major international organizations, especially the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, have highlighted the progress made over the past 30 years in the struggle against poverty, but that progress remains very slow. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the rate of infant mortality (the most reliable indication of social advance) has decreased during this period from 165 to 103 per thousand, but still remains seven times higher than in Europe. Adult literacy has increased by 70% since 1970, yet more than half the population — two-thirds of women — remain illiterate. In the Western industrialized countries and those of the former communist bloc, moreover, poverty is on the increase. Caught unawares, the public authorities

¹ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Improving the situation of the most vulnerable — Strategic Work Plan for the Nineties*, revised by the General Assembly at its IXth Session, Birmingham, 25-28 October 1993, p.5.

are overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and often find themselves powerless to respond to new forms of economic and social exclusion.

Economic development is regarded nowadays as a means of ensuring full development “of the whole individual and of all mankind”:² National and international development strategies place the accent on “human development”. Implementation of these policies, however, remains hesitant, for vested interests, social and political short-sightedness, unfavourable economic conditions and lack of imagination still hamper the few measures that are agreed.

In this difficult context, only action based on an analysis of the deep-rooted causes of these phenomena can be effective. This article will therefore consider some of the causes of vulnerability and current trends in this regard in different political, economic and social situations.

Vulnerability and poverty

The concept of vulnerability may be applied to individuals, social groups and even societies. It reflects a position of weakness and the upset of a precarious equilibrium, which together propel the individual or group into an ever-deepening spiral of misfortune. Vulnerability is characterized by the inability in the short term to do anything to remedy the situation.

Does vulnerability go hand in hand with poverty? A distinction needs to be made here between absolute and relative poverty.

Absolute poverty, according to the World Bank, is a “*situation which is so deeply marked by malnutrition, ignorance and disease as to be outside any reasonable definition of human dignity*”.³ Groups in this situation are those qualified by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies⁴ as being the most vulnerable. The definition of absolute poverty varies according to the society concerned, for the poverty threshold — the income below which an individual or a household lives in absolute poverty — differs from country to country, depending

² François Perroux, *L'économie du XX^e siècle*, PUF, Paris, 1964, p. 370.

³ World Bank, *Report on World Development, 1980*, World Bank, Washington 1980, p. 38.

⁴ For the Federation, the most vulnerable are “*those at great risk from situations that threaten their survival or their capacity to live with a minimum of social and economic security and human dignity*”. *Op. cit.*, note 1 above, p.7.

on cultural values, average levels of consumption and climatic conditions. The poverty threshold for each country can be calculated. At the beginning of the 1990s, these thresholds ranged from \$275 per inhabitant in the low-income countries to more than \$3,500 in middle-income countries.⁵

Relative poverty refers to the distribution of income and wealth within a society and is measured by the percentage of total income received by the poorest quintile (or two quintiles) of the population. In theory, unequal distribution of income does not necessarily result in absolute poverty, any more than equitable distribution guarantees the elimination of absolute poverty. The relationship between absolute and relative poverty depends on average income in the country; the lower the average income, the more nearly relative poverty corresponds to absolute poverty. In general, the distribution of revenue tends to be more unequal in lower-income countries than in those with higher incomes.

The impoverished sector of a country's population remains very vulnerable, even though it may have the bare means to survive. The poor are at the mercy of the hazards of family life (illness, accidents, death of a breadwinner, loss of employment). Only "safety nets" such as those provided by social security and group or family solidarity can prevent their being drawn into the spiral of cumulative adversity. The relationship between relative poverty and vulnerability therefore depends not only on average income but also on the nature of the social fabric.

The concept of vulnerability is not limited to the non-satisfaction of material needs. It also includes discriminatory conduct which offends the dignity of individuals or social groups. Such conduct is not necessarily due to a malfunctioning of democratic institutions; it may also emanate from the accepted scale of values. People infected by the HIV virus in wealthy societies are a case in point. The sphere of social vulnerability therefore extends beyond that of poverty.

The causes of vulnerability: a systemic approach

In every society, vulnerable groups can be identified according to their personal characteristics: age, sex, family situation, home, employment, level of education and training. Sometimes membership of a social group,

⁵ World Bank, *World Development Report 1990*, World Bank, Washington, 1990, p. 32.

ethnic group or caste is an additional factor. Analysis of these various factors makes it possible to identify the “groups at risk” and to form a reasonably accurate idea of the phenomenon.

Any enquiry into the causes of vulnerability must take its economic, social and political determinants into account. At the **economic** level, the guarantee of a regular income ensuring the satisfaction of primary needs depends basically on access to the factors of production, i.e. land, capital and employment. At the **social** level it is a question of evaluating the accessibility of the various health, educational and training services. Health, in this context, implies preventive measures, access to curative services and the enjoyment of a healthy environment (clean water, proper waste disposal). The **political** determinant concerns participation in government, not only in the exercise of civil rights but also in local systems of decision-making which affect the economic and social factors of vulnerability.

These three determinants are closely connected and have cumulative effects. Access to education, for example, increases the chance of finding a job and enjoying a regular income. It is also the only way of knowing one’s rights and of participating in political life, in order to improve the availability of education and health services. In many countries, lack of access to land remains one of the major causes of poverty and vulnerability in rural areas, and is also a major cause of social and political tension. Only political decisions can remedy this situation. Finally, access to credit is an essential element in improving the economic security of the most vulnerable, but this can be extended only if the latter are in a position to negotiate with those in charge of the banking system. This in turn presupposes that the groups concerned are adequately informed and capable of making their voices heard.

In the last two decades the **natural environment** has become an additional factor affecting vulnerability alongside the various social factors, for it is evident that the rural population of low-income countries is under increasing threat from the effects of soil destruction (erosion or salinization). This phenomenon is the result of mismanagement of arable land and of deforestation. The process is cumulative because the impoverished population is unable to take the measures necessary to reverse degradation of the environment. It uses wood from the forests for cooking because it lacks the purchasing power to obtain other sources of energy, such as gas and kerosene. The over-exploitation of forests causes erosion and degradation of the soil and natural resources, and the population sinks deeper into poverty.

Vulnerable groups thus include the poorest rural populations who live in areas with limited agricultural potential and are threatened by a deteriorating environment. Some 370 million people (i.e. 57% of the poorest rural inhabitants of developing countries) belong to this group.⁶

Measures designed to remedy the fundamental causes of vulnerability must simultaneously address all its various dimensions. This involves attacking the vicious circle of poverty in order, as it were, to turn it back upon itself. Among the many preconditions for such action, the three most important are:

- firm political will and wide consensus among the most influential circles in society;
- the ability to analyse the situation and to formulate and implement a strategy which will affect almost every sector of society;
- adequate resources to ensure that the whole population has access to basic services.

These conditions are rarely met. Experience in numerous poor countries has shown that the most vulnerable groups in the population benefit less from economic prosperity than others; but they also pay a disproportionate price during periods of recession and crisis.

Towards a “two-speed” world society?

This inequitable apportionment of the cost of economic crisis is now apparent in various parts of the world.

For the past fifteen years, a number of **developing countries** — and especially the poorest — have been in deep economic crisis, which has prompted austerity policies and structural adjustments. The measures taken, however, have often failed to prevent the impoverishment of certain social categories and have worsened the situation of the very poorest; particularly threatened are those barely able to survive. Frequently, the State has neither the political will nor the means to provide adequate social safety nets. The result is an erosion of living standards whose long-term effects are proving to be very disturbing. For example:

⁶ These data come from a study conducted in 1989 by the Overseas Development Council, Washington, cited by UNICEF in: *The state of the world's children, 1994*, UNICEF, New York, p.33.

- When there are cuts in basic social services for the most needy because of a reduction in public expenditure, the education and health sectors are particularly hard hit. In sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of primary schooling stagnated or even declined during the 1980s.
- During the 1980s nutritional standards among children in certain Latin American and many sub-Saharan countries worsened.

This deterioration in the economies of the poorest countries is very worrying because it is children — the most vulnerable members of society — who are the most severely affected. What hope is there for the long-term development of a country whose youth has been denied health care and education?

The social cost of structural adjustments has received increasing attention since the 1980s. UNICEF, in particular, has made great efforts to promote “adjustment with a human face”,⁷ for austerity in a context of poverty entails a relentless decline in the living conditions of the most destitute. More generally, in many countries it creates a polarized society. On the one hand there is a minority (some 20 — 25% of the population) who tend to reap the benefits of a level of production and consumption comparable with that of the industrialized countries. On the other hand there is a majority (those living in the rural areas and urban peripheries) who struggle to survive on uncertain income from agriculture and the “parallel” sector. This majority lives from hand to mouth, at the mercy of the slightest misfortune that can topple it into total penury. Women, children and old people are particularly fragile and at risk from exclusion from society. In such difficult living conditions, drugs, prostitution and delinquency may become the only means of survival.

Social vulnerability is linked with the international vulnerability affecting poor nations which occupy a marginal slot in the world economy. For several decades now, such marginalization of the so-called “less advanced” countries has become apparent. Their limited range of export products becomes ever more difficult to sell on the world markets.

The countries of **Eastern Europe and the former USSR** are also going through a painful political, economic and social transition period; the cost of change is proving greater and more enduring than was anticipated at the time of the collapse of communism. A recent report on the

⁷ UNICEF, *Adjustment with a human face*, published under the direction of G. A. Cornia, R. Jolly, F. Stewart, Economica, Paris, 1987, 372 pp.

social situation in these countries⁸ shows that the proportion of the population living below the poverty line, as defined for each country, increased considerably between 1989 and 1992.⁹ This is attributable as much to the decline in economic activity as to the growing inequality in the distribution of income. The social groups hardest hit are those which were already below the poverty threshold under the former regime. For the most part they comprise old people, large families, single-parent families, the handicapped, and minority and marginal groups. In addition, there are now the “new poor”, mainly young people looking for their first jobs, the unemployed with no benefits and a growing number of migrants and refugees.¹⁰

In certain of these countries another new factor has emerged, that is, the sharp rise in male mortality between the ages of 20 and 39 years. Between 1989 and 1993, mortality in this group rose by 32% in Russia and 11% in Hungary. The first analyses of this new trend reveal an increase in suicide and violent death. This is attributable in particular to the “growing institutional and administrative vacuum, lack of social monitoring and erosion of the regulatory role of the State”.¹¹ Thus, in Russia from January to June 1993 the number of murders increased 1.6 times and deaths due to alcoholic poisoning 2.4 times as compared with the same period in 1992. This development is related to the economic situation and underemployment. Young adults and adolescents (both boys and girls) are proving especially vulnerable to poverty, alcoholism and delinquency. Added to the economic problems are those of a society which is adrift and which has rejected its former values without adopting new ones.

In the **high-income industrialized countries** the situation is different. In general there is less poverty, but national statistics can conceal disparities. It is estimated,¹² for example, that some 100 million people are living below the poverty line — a situation largely due to unemployment. The

⁸ UNICEF, *Central and Eastern Europe in Transition, Public Policy and Social Conditions, Regional Monitoring Report No. 1*, November 1993, UNICEF, International Child Development Centre, Florence, 89 pp.

⁹ These trends are confirmed by some studies conducted by the European Economic Commission (see Jean-Michel Collette, “*Perspectives économiques en Europe centrale et orientale*” (economic prospects in Central and Eastern Europe), in *Futuribles*, No. 183, December 1993, pp. 27 — 42.

¹⁰ UNICEF (1993), *op.cit.*, p.11.

¹¹ UNICEF (1993), *op.cit.*, p.25.

¹² UNDP, *Human Development Report 1993*, Economica, Paris, 1993, p.13.

number of unemployed now stands at 30 million. In certain countries, such as France and Germany, fewer people were employed in 1987 than in 1960, despite a doubling of the gross domestic product. Long-term unemployment is increasing and has reached a level unknown since the end of World War II. A quarter of the unemployed have been jobless for more than two years. In many countries, social security has not been adjusted to cope with this new phenomenon. The unemployed who no longer receive benefits are especially vulnerable, sometimes slipping through the net of social security and becoming caught up in the vicious circle of poverty. Loss of employment and subsequently loss of regular income push them out onto the fringes of society, where they can end up homeless and become social outcasts.

During recent years, the social order in the industrialized countries has undergone profound changes. Family structures are changing. Single-parent families are becoming more and more numerous. The combination of poverty and the breakdown of the family is a factor conducive to vulnerability, especially if the single parent is a woman. Women are paid less than men and are more severely affected by unemployment. In many industrialized countries, the new poor are often women bringing up children on their own, widows and elderly women.

The phenomena of social exclusion are not exclusively related to poverty. Drug abuse and the suicide rate are indicators of human misery which high national incomes do not alleviate. Loneliness wreaks havoc in rich societies.

Conclusion

Every type of society has its own forms of vulnerability, but it is difficult to compare them. There is a common feature, however, and that is the relatively marked evolution towards “two-speed” societies — societies in which some social groups become marginalized because they have a share neither in wealth nor in power. In the high-income industrialized countries, minority groups affected by the economic crisis tend to increase in number and become more impoverished as the recession deepens. In poor countries, most of the population live in a state of exclusion, and this division in society further foments ethnic and religious tensions.

This is a disquieting development, for it carries within it the seeds of conflict, violence and social unrest. There is, however, no cause for

despair: vulnerability is not inevitable. It arises from the economic, political and socio-cultural structures of a given society and the way in which they evolve. The cumulative process leading to destitution can be reversed if the will is there. The long struggle to secure respect for the pariahs of the caste system in India is a prime example of this determination to bring about change.

Experience in many countries has shown that the best antidote to vulnerability lies in social recognition, for this facilitates dialogue with the holders of economic and political power. Vulnerable groups are their own best advocates and must therefore be able to set up their own institutions to express and achieve their aspirations. This requires financial resources and skills which are not always available, so a catalyst often proves necessary.

It is for the non-governmental organizations to assume this role. They must complement or propose adjustments to the measures taken by public authorities, which are finding it difficult to achieve a lasting improvement in the condition of the most deprived. In many countries and in the most varied cultural contexts, these organizations are demonstrating their capacity for action. If the spiral of vulnerability is to be reversed, this potential of generosity, courage and skill must be developed.

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