

The concept of vulnerability: beyond the focus on vulnerable groups

by **Mary B. Anderson**

The recent explicit focus on “vulnerable groups” by international assistance agencies — particularly those that respond to emergency situations around the world — reflects two important concerns. First, aid providers want to be able to identify potential victims of disasters in order to anticipate and mitigate such events, and second, they use the identification of vulnerable groups as a way of targeting assistance, which is always restricted by limited resources, towards those groups who most need it. However, vulnerability should be understood as a far more powerful concept in the design and implementation of aid operations than simply as a criterion for targeting aid. In fact, problems arise when the notion of vulnerability is used only or primarily to identify groups who should receive assistance.

Below, I shall discuss the problems that can arise when vulnerability is seen only as a criterion for selecting beneficiary groups, and suggest an understanding of vulnerability which is more complex but more useful for programming purposes, and which should be adopted by donor agencies in their assistance efforts.

Vulnerable groups as target beneficiaries

An understanding of vulnerability as useful only for identifying groups with which to work can limit or distort programme effectiveness. There are four ways in which this may occur.

1. Invisibility of capacities

The first and most important danger that may arise from too limited an understanding of vulnerability is the danger that, while recognizing the vulnerability of a particular group, providers of assistance may fail to recognize and support the capacities of the people in that group. “Vulnerability” is too often seen as “weakness”, and people who are vulnerable are assumed to be unable to provide for or protect themselves. They become targets of our programming because “they need our help”.

But all people, even vulnerable people, have capacities. These may be skills, ideas, possessions, or attitudes held by individuals. Or they may be, for example, systems of government, of sharing or allocating goods, or of protecting weaker members, which are capacities of communities.¹ People may live in a hazardous location, but if they have capacities to protect themselves (through escape systems, preventive construction technologies, insurance policies, etc.), then these capacities enable them to reduce, or even eliminate, their vulnerability.

When assistance is provided to people to “meet their needs” without regard to their existing capacities, very often the capacities that they possess are undermined and weakened by the overpowering presence of the aid giver. When this occurs, vulnerabilities are often increased rather than reduced by aid. An adequate notion of vulnerability, then, must also take account of people's capacities. For programming purposes, recognition of the capacities of vulnerable people with whom we work provides the basis for figuring out how to work — that is, how to provide assistance that best supports, rather than undermines, these capacities.

2. “Automatic” vulnerability

As the idea of identifying vulnerable groups has gained momentum, there has been a tendency to regard certain groups as vulnerable in all situations without adequate analysis of the reality of the circumstances that may or may not result in vulnerability in any particular situation.

For example, women are often labelled as “vulnerable”. But are they always? The answer, obviously, is “no”. When women are marginalized, excluded from meaningful economic and political participation, impoverished and unprotected (either by community structures or by family

¹ Anderson, Mary B., and Woodrow Peter J., *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*, Westview Press, Boulder and San Francisco, UNESCO, Paris, 1989, 338 p.

members), then they are indeed vulnerable. Often, however, women are significant or even primary bread-winners for their families, they control and use resources to meet family needs, and they plan, organize and arrange matters to ensure family survival. In these circumstances, while some catastrophe may disrupt or threaten their capacities, it will probably not make women any more vulnerable than other family members.

On the other hand, in situations of war, able-bodied men may be more vulnerable than women, although aid agencies seldom identify this group as vulnerable. For example, if they become fighters, men are clearly vulnerable to death and injury; or, if they do not want to join the fighting forces, they may face conscription or be forced to flee to avoid it.

Who is actually vulnerable, then, depends very much on the particular circumstances of each context, and a group that is vulnerable in one context may not be vulnerable somewhere else. For programming purposes, identifying the causes of vulnerability is more important than simply identifying who is vulnerable. Programmes should always address these causes even as they serve the people who suffer from them.

3. Working with the “wrong” people

Even when aid donors identify vulnerable groups accurately and acknowledge the capacities of these groups, if they focus all their programme attention on the people in the vulnerable group they may not be doing the best job of reducing this group's vulnerabilities. Sometimes the causes of vulnerability lie outside the community which is vulnerable. Control of a river upstream may make the people who live downstream vulnerable to floods or to water shortages. Bribes to building inspectors may mean that earthquake-resistant technologies are not incorporated into housing construction even though a community believes it is protected by housing codes.

For programming purposes, again, it is as important to analyse whose actions cause or reinforce vulnerability as it is to identify who is vulnerable as a result of those actions.

4. Once vulnerable, always vulnerable

Finally, agencies which focus on working with vulnerable groups have too often understood vulnerability as a static concept. Once they have made the effort to identify who is vulnerable in a given situation, they accept this group as the “target” beneficiary group of their programming and continue to work with them without regular reassessment. However,

if programming is effective, vulnerability should be reduced through programme efforts. An agency that is committed to working with the "most vulnerable" would then be forced to identify another group for its primary attention.

Whether it is better to continue to work with a community in long-term partnership or to shift the focus of assistance to successive groups as some communities are helped out of vulnerability and others assume priority depends on a number of factors. Good programming decisions must, however, incorporate an understanding of the dynamics of vulnerability as well as an identification of who is vulnerable.

Having discussed these four problems that can arise when the concept of vulnerability is relied on only for identifying programme beneficiaries, let us now explore the importance of the vulnerability concept, as it forms the basis for both the design and the implementation of assistance programmes.

Understanding vulnerability more fully

There are three important factors to consider in a fuller understanding of vulnerability as the basis for programming.

First, vulnerability does not come, somehow, from "outside". While hazards may arise from nature and be, in that sense, outside human control, vulnerability to the impact of those hazards results from human decisions about where to live (and, thus, whether or not to be exposed to natural hazards) and how to live (depleting the earth's resources, contaminating nature with the effluents of production and consumption or replanting forests, conserving soil, etc.). Thus vulnerability arises from the interaction of social, political, economic and psychological systems with hazards.

Because human decisions and choices are involved in increasing vulnerability, human decisions and choices can also reduce (even eliminate?) vulnerability. It is in our (human) power to ensure that no group needs to be identified as vulnerable any longer.

Second, although human activities affect vulnerability, it is not always those who cause vulnerability who also suffer from it. That is, actions by people in one part of the world may increase the vulnerability of others in some distant place. Many of the hazards of the late twentieth century are the result of the types of economic production system that have been adopted. Chemical wastes that pollute air, water and soil result in environ-

mental degradation that has no borders. Depletion of the ozone layer, for example, is the result of many actions undertaken by a number of different societies to improve their immediate economic welfare. The result is increased vulnerability worldwide, with an impact on people who neither gained from the production techniques nor had any choice in what was done.

Third, although human societies have made great progress in understanding nature and in controlling many of its negative effects, vulnerability has been constantly rising. The number of disasters has increased, the number of people affected and the value of property destroyed have risen.² Added to the disasters that are prompted by natural phenomena and environmental factors are the social/political disasters of the many and widespread wars and civil conflicts we see in today's world. Without some major changes in the ways that human societies operate, the trend of rising vulnerability will continue unabated.

Taking these three points together, it becomes clear that the concept of vulnerability is the starting point — and an important guide — for programming. As we identify certain groups as vulnerable and needing assistance, we must also identify the sources of their vulnerability. Why are these people in this context vulnerable? What decisions and choices have been made — and by whom — that have created the circumstances that put them at risk? To ask, and answer, such questions is the starting point for effective programme design. Such analysis clarifies what needs to be done, and who must be involved in doing it, to reduce the causes of vulnerability.

In addition, as noted above, identification of the roots of vulnerability is important for the people who are themselves vulnerable, as they develop and improve their own capacities for counteracting their vulnerability. Assistance agencies working with vulnerable groups, therefore, should assist these groups in defining the sources of their vulnerability and in developing their own capacities for overcoming it. As also noted above, recognition of the importance of this approach to vulnerability reduction constitutes the “how” of development assistance. Agencies concerned with vulnerability must work with vulnerable groups, emphasizing these groups' own capacity to change their vulnerable conditions.

² *World Disaster Report*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 1993, p. 33ff.

When an assistance agency defines its mission, as more and more are now doing, in terms of working with vulnerable peoples, it should also be clear that working with vulnerable groups involves identification of the causes of vulnerability, an analysis of who is involved and how, and an approach to work that enables the most vulnerable to realize their own capacities for changing their lives.

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