

## Social dimensions of vulnerability and disaster risk

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The presentation provided a global overview of social dimensions of vulnerability to natural hazards and their linkages with wider concepts of disaster risk. The focus from the outset was on the 'social' category that matters the most in disaster risk reduction (DRR), the people at risk. Risk can be articulated in terms of infrastructure, services and economic systems, but ultimately it is people that feel the effects of hazards and their conversion into disasters.

The first point to underline is that there is a chain of events at work in disaster risk, starting with the occurrence of extreme events that generate hazards. These hazards are associated with impacts, which if great enough in intensity and scale, can be converted into disaster events. The job of DRR is to take steps to break those points in the chain – through prevention, mitigation, preparedness, emergency response and recovery – so that human suffering can be avoided or reduced.

The second point to emphasise is that, though extreme events may be the trigger, disasters themselves are not purely a result of physical processes. Risk is as much socially generated as it is physically, because it is social conditions that shape who is exposed, and who can best avoid, resist, cope and recover from the impacts of hazards. Moreover, this element of risk is socially differentiated, because access to resources and support strongly affects vulnerability and such access varies greatly from one social group to another. This is evident even at global scale from the skew of disaster statistics toward lower income populations around the world.

What is perhaps surprising is that this dimension of risk was poorly acknowledged until at least the 1970s, with disasters generally treated as singular events wholly caused by natural forces. Many working in disaster management still retain this view of disasters as 'natural', but the movement to recognise that disasters are social events with potential social actions that can reduce risk has gradually gained ground and is now established in the international DRR movement. It is also well established in disasters research, through ideas that underline how social conditions often with deep underlying causes can come together with hazard

events to produce catastrophic effects. These raise issues of social justice and equity.

Disasters should also be seen not just as short-term 'events' but processes, with historical roots in social conditions and potentially long-term consequences for livelihoods. Hazards have direct and indirect impacts on multiple aspects of people's lives, livelihoods, health and wellbeing, and it needs to be recognised that multiple or recurrent hazard strikes can lead to negative spirals of vulnerability and poverty. Yet it is important too not to view risk in isolation, especially for those already struggling to meet life's needs - hazards need to be seen as part of a web of issues and dynamics in people's lives and people's response to risk needs to be understood in that context. Such considerations should lead us not just to analysing vulnerability as a negative attribute of people, but to recognise and work with the positive capacities people have, valuing their knowledge and skills, respecting that they may not always prioritise risk, and seeking to support their capacity to manage risk.