

# Vulnerability and poverty reduction: a review of the literature

## Key Findings

- In most poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs) there is no separate analysis of vulnerability. It is considered as a dimension of poverty or included in the definition of poverty.
- Exposure to natural hazards is generally mentioned but rarely is there detailed discussion of disasters, their causes, impacts, mitigation efforts or wider connection to development.
- While vulnerable groups are almost always identified, they are often presented as static categories and not linked to a discussion of particular processes or circumstances that lead to labelling them as 'vulnerable'.
- There may be some detailed discussion of environmental issues, but often the link between vulnerability and environmental issues is not elaborated in depth.
- Due to the macro and aggregated analysis often contained in many PRSPs there is little reference to livelihood groups and livelihood strategies.
- There is very limited reference given to the role of institutions and other resource actors in influencing the context for vulnerability.
- Limited attention is given to the underlying causes of vulnerability, and most PRSPs only refer generally to reducing vulnerability in their proposed strategies, with few providing a detailed discussion.
- On the one hand, policy and actions, such as diversification, are widely recognized as contributing to poverty and vulnerability reduction, while on the other hand less than half of the reviewed PRSPs consider issues of socio-economic equity as being important to building resilience.



### Reducing vulnerability: from theory to practice

With so many people living below or just above the poverty line, there remains significant potential for vulnerability analysis to be better employed in poverty reduction strategies to determine specific measures to break the cycle of poverty. Vulnerability and vulnerability analysis can deepen our understanding of who is susceptible to environmental stresses and hazards, and why. This was the finding of a recent SEI report by Fiona Miller, Elnora de la Rosa and Maria Bohn from a study that reviewed the attention given to vulnerability to environmental stresses and natural hazards in a number of poverty reduction strategies papers (PRSPs). While it found that vulnerability is increasingly acknowledged as an important dimension of poverty, there remain some challenges in turning this acknowledgement into action.

### Why focus on vulnerability in PRSPs?

PRSPs play a significant role in guiding economic planning in developing countries, especially in highly-indebted countries. PRSPs are documents used by the World Bank, the IMF and the wider donor community to better focus their policies and development assistance programmes, together with national governments. PRSPs also play a crucial role in strategies to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of halving poverty by 2015.

Vulnerability analysis offers the potential to identify the social groups, livelihoods, regions or sectors that are particularly



vulnerable to environmental stresses and hazards. When such analysis is brought into the development strategies on poverty reduction, more refined targeting and prioritisation of interventions, as well as appropriate policies, can be realised to both prevent and reduce poverty.

#### VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability is interpreted in this study as the degree to which a system (such as a social-ecological system) is likely to be wounded or experience harm from a perturbation or stress in the natural or social environment (Turner et al, 2003).

Vulnerability results from a combination of processes that shape the degrees of exposure to a hazard, sensitivity to its stress and impacts, and resilience in the face of those effects.

Vulnerability is considered a characteristic of all people, ecosystems, and regions confronting environmental or socioeconomic stresses and, although the level of vulnerability varies widely, it is generally higher among poorer people (Kasperson et al., 2001).

Kasperson, R. E., Kasperson, J. X., and Dow, K. (2001), 'Vulnerability, equity, and global environmental change', in J. X. Kasperson and R. E. Kasperson (eds.), *Global Environmental Risk*, London: Earthscan.

Turner II, B.L., et al., *A framework for vulnerability analysis in sustainability science*. PNAS, 2003. 100(14)

#### Project Aims and Approach to Vulnerability

This project developed a rigorous methodology, based on a set of criteria, to assess the attention given to vulnerability issues in PRSPs and evaluated strategies for more effective policy and management interventions for vulnerability reduction. The project is part of the Poverty and Vulnerability Programme funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) and undertaken by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

In this study, Vulnerability was interpreted to be the degree to which a system (such as a social-ecological system) is likely to be harmed by a perturbation in the natural or social environment. A specific vulnerability framework, set of research questions and literature review was undertaken, and twelve country PRSPs were reviewed from regions of East Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

#### Ways forward

This study proves that there is real scope and potential for poverty analysis and poverty reduction strategies to benefit from vulnerability analysis. Collection and analysis of data that is socially and spatially differentiated can facilitate improved targeting of social, economic and environmental policy and actions for poverty reduction. Strategies that specifically aim to target the most vulnerable people and address the underlying causes of vulnerability to environmental change and stresses are likely to improve the overall well-being of communities in the immediate and more distant futures.



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### So what next?

This report joins a number of other studies that highlight how, despite the attention given to vulnerability issues, there remains an outstanding challenge to translate this into specific vulnerability reduction measures. Many PRSP authors seem to use vulnerability terminology without demonstrating a good understanding of the terms or accompanying tools and analysis. Poor analysis of vulnerability to environmental risks, including natural hazards, means policy makers are limited in their ability to develop specific interventions to improve people's well-being.

The power and utility of vulnerability analysis for poverty reduction is in helping communities and policy makers together to identify groups, regions, livelihoods and sectors that are vulnerable to different stresses and thereby target and

prioritise poverty reduction efforts. Such an approach needs also to consider successful livelihood strategies and coping capacities that contribute to making people resilient in the face of shocks and surprises.

This policy brief is based on the paper *"The Challenge of Moving from Acknowledgement to Action: A Review of Vulnerability to Environmental Stresses and Natural Hazards in PRSPs"*, by Fiona Miller, Elnora de le Rosa and Maria Bohn, published by Stockholm Environment Institute (2008)



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## Recommendations

### To analyse more effectively poverty-vulnerability linkages:

- Conceptual clarity on vulnerability could be improved.
- Better understanding of hazards is also required, considering analysis of trends and changes in the incidence and frequency.
- It is necessary to use a clear criteria or methodology for identifying vulnerable people.
- Greater effort needs to be made to collect data that can be disaggregated between social groups, areas and over time, and especially by gender.
- Environmental issues should not be treated as separate from their social context; better analysis is required on how environmental change affects different social groups.

### To promote good practice in vulnerability analysis and reduction strategies:

- It is necessary to know not only who is vulnerable and to what, but also where vulnerable people are located. Participatory assessments are required in order to draw on people's own perceptions and knowledge of vulnerability.
- Greater use of vulnerability indicators and poverty maps, hazard maps and vulnerability maps could improve programmatic targeting.
- Improved understanding of the interaction between environmental and other stresses is required.
- Improved analysis of the connection between access to assets, resources and entitlements and coping capacity.
- Great attention to livelihoods would allow improved analysis of local vulnerability reduction strategies.
- Institutional capacity analysis could be improved, particularly in the areas of environmental, social and disaster reduction policy.

### To reduce exposure and sensitivity to multiple stresses, and to build resilience:

- As vulnerability cuts across many sectors, programs and policies an integrated approach between relevant institutions and stakeholders is required.
- Successful strategies to diversify income sources and livelihoods, and reduce socio-economic inequities, should be documented.

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