

Who are those most affected by social vulnerability?

Marginalized groups, such as the poor, women, children and elderly, tend to be the most affected by shocks like natural disasters. Some groups, such as poor women, also have coping mechanisms such as strong social networks that help them withstand the negative effects of disruptive shocks like catastrophes. More needs to be known about these resilience mechanisms to understand whether they can be multiplied and used to increase the resilience of people at risk from disasters.

Where is social vulnerability the biggest problem?

Social vulnerability is found overwhelmingly in developing countries where vulnerability reduction strategies compete with economic development, urban growth, environmental exploitation and cultural perceptions. Efforts to reduce social vulnerability go hand in hand with sustainable development and improvements in quality of life.

When is social vulnerability most apparent?

Social vulnerability is a preexisting condition that affects a society's ability to prepare for and recover from a disaster. Disasters and similar shocks make social vulnerability visible since the unequal patterns of suffering and difficulty in recovery become apparent. Conditions such as environmental degradation, water scarcity or civil conflict aggravate social vulnerability.

EXAMPLE

What is social vulnerability?

In its broadest sense, social vulnerability refers to the inability of people, societies, and organizations to withstand adverse impacts from natural hazards. The concept of social vulnerability links environments where people live to social interactions, institutions, and systems of cultural values. "The concept of vulnerability expresses the multidimensionality of disasters by focusing attention on the totality of relationships in a given social situation which constitute a condition that, in combination with environmental forces, produces a disaster" (Bankoff et al. 2004: 11).

What issues does vulnerability research address?

Research in this field strives to identify the key variables and mechanisms of social vulnerability. In a time when policy directives increasingly focus on reducing aspects of vulnerability — such as poverty, hunger, disease, etc. — it is critical to understand the forces that allow social vulnerability to persist and to address the systems in which social vulnerability exists. The research aims to suggest ways to unravel and dispel the central drivers of vulnerability so that sustainable improvements can be achieved in making society resilient to natural disasters and other kinds of shocks.

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From Knowledge
to Action



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**Social
Vulnerability
Summer
Academy**

Ten experts, twenty students and many research issue



Top left:
Anthony Oliver-Smith, Úrsula Oswald Spring, Susan Cutter and Hans-Georg Bohle evaluate a policy briefing created by the academy participants



Bottom left:
Mo Hamza in dialogue with Anthony Oliver-Smith

Right:
Tom Downing and Michelle Leighton in discussion

The Chairs on Social Vulnerability

In 2005, the Munich Re Foundation entered into a partnership with the United Nations University — Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) to support and initiate policy-relevant research on social vulnerability. Together we have established a Chair on Social Vulnerability at UNU-EHS.

The Chair, consisting of seven designated Chairholders acting on a rotating basis for one academic year and coordinated by an Academic Officer, explores the cultural and economic dimensions of social vulnerability, including institutional and governance factors. Seven internationally renowned professors hold the Chair:

Prof. Dr. Úrsula Oswald Spring
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)
Psychologist and politician, environmental and gender specialist
— 2005/2006

Prof. Dr. Hans-Georg Bohle
University of Bonn, Germany
Geographer and expert on poverty and resilience, with focus on India
— 2006/2007

Prof. Dr. Anthony Oliver-Smith
University of Florida, USA
Anthropologist on Central America specialising in migration and displaced persons
— 2007/2008

Prof. Dr. Thomas E. Downing
Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Oxford Office, United Kingdom
Climate and environmental scientist
— 2008/2009

Prof. Dr. Michelle Leighton
University of San Francisco, USA
Director of Human Rights Programmes at the Centre for Law and Global Justice, expert in international law and human rights
— 2009/2010

Prof. Dr. Mohamed Hamza
Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), Oxford Office, United Kingdom
Expert in environmental and disaster management and field work specialist
— 2010/2011

Prof. Dr. Susan Cutter
University of South Carolina, USA
Geographer and Director of the Hazards Research Lab, expert in disaster reduction and social vulnerability
— 2011/2012

What it is

Special attention is given to indigenous perceptions, participatory approaches, and community-based coping practices to detect and reduce vulnerability. The goal is to develop a cutting-edge research and policy implementation agenda on social vulnerability, and to provide a platform for dialogue between scientists, established experts and UN representatives.

Linking up young researchers, senior scholars, and other experts is one of our major activities within the network on social vulnerability. Each summer academy covers a special topic, e.g. Global water hotspots (2006), Megacities as hotspots of risk (2007), Environmental change, migration and social vulnerability (2008), and Tipping points in humanitarian crises (2009).

The academy takes place at Schloss Hohenkammer, Germany. UNU-EHS and the Munich Re Foundation invite 20 selected PhD candidates and several experts from different continents. One part of the students comes from developing countries. The cross-disciplinary character of social vulnerability issues is mirrored by the participants' backgrounds in fields as broad as anthropology, geography, hydrology, economics, engineering, law and sociology.

The Summer Academies have yielded a series of publications which have been disseminated in both the scientific and policy-making realms. The best papers produced by the academy participants are published in the UNU-EHS SOURCE series.



Programme, presentations, applications and contact:
www.munichre-foundation.org
or www.ehs.unu.edu



Bottom:
Bikash Bhattacharyya, Mayor of Kolkata, India, attending the academy on megacities

A unique week

A unique week in a unique environment: work rooms, rooms for relaxation and rest and plenty of open space: Hohenkammer, Munich Re's moated medieval castle, offers a unique mix of modern elements. This special place, the interaction of participants from all over the world and the close guidance of recognised experts make it possible to achieve high-quality, topical work results even in a short time.

The Summer Academy combines academic research with practical exercises. Its main objectives are steep learning curves, illuminating insights and thinking in new terms.

In 2006, young scientists at the Academy analysed the social dimensions of current major catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina.

In 2007, the participants produced a scheme for dealing with the problems posed by megacity slums; the scheme was then given careful consideration by the mayor of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), who also took part in the lively discussion.

Political debate with high-level representatives from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) opened the eyes of young scientists who devoted their time at the Academy in 2008 to a study of environmentally induced migration.

In 2009, the year in which the UN Climate Change Conference is to take place in Copenhagen, the participants produced a fundamental paper entitled "Tipping Points in Humanitarian Crises" for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).