Welcome to the first Social Vulnerability Bulletin, an annual update of research and activities on social vulnerability jointly sponsored by the United Nations University Institute of Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS) and the Munich Re Foundation (MRF). This partnership has been in place since 2005, highlighting each organization’s focus on human well-being amidst changing global conditions.

Social vulnerability affects marginalized groups such as the poor, women, children, and the elderly but shocks such as natural hazards or complex humanitarian crises make the effects of vulnerability visible to the wider public. Where homelessness or lack of livelihoods may be a chronic problem in many countries throughout the world, major shocks that drive people into refugee camps, into the slum neighborhoods of megacities, or attract media attention serve as a reminder of the presence of social vulnerability and the need to understand it. The partnership between UNU-EHS and MRF was initiative precisely to facilitate research and a search for policy solutions for social vulnerability.

This bulletin is the vehicle to capture current research by young professionals, as well as established experts, and provide a springboard for networking and further impetus for interdisciplinary research on social vulnerability.

Sincerely,

Prof. Dr. Janos J. Bogardi
Director UNU-EHS

Thomas Loster
Chairman Munich Re Foundation

♦ A common understanding of vulnerability
♦ Measuring and analyzing vulnerability
♦ Public awareness
♦ Policy Implications

2007 Megacities in the Spotlight

Megacities, mega-challenges: Young researchers seek solutions at 2007 Summer Academy.

The second Summer Academy held by the United Nations University in conjunction with the Munich Re Foundation focused initially on the research methods employed and results obtained by the doctoral candidates, who come from a wide variety of fields such as geography, psychology, anthropology, engineering and planning. Often, it is necessary to bring together people from a variety of disciplines in order to come up with new solutions to known problems. In the case of megacities, the problems generally revolve around poverty and the poor quality of life.

You can view posters, presentations, and working papers from the 2007 Summer Academy on Social Vulnerability at http://www.munichre-foundation.org and/or www.ehs.unu.edu

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Megacity Resilience Framework

A group of young scientists and experts met at the 2007 Summer Academy on Social vulnerability to discuss “Megacities: social vulnerability and measures to build social resilience,” held in Hohenkammer, Germany and hosted by the United Nations University and the Munich Re Foundation. The objective of the academy was to identify key factors and processes influencing social vulnerability and resilience building and to visualise their interlinkages. The central outcome of the week-long working session was the Megacity Resilience Framework. Experts and young professionals from different disciplines, all working on social vulnerability in urban areas, jointly developed the framework.

Using frameworks in social vulnerability research has an old tradition. Watts and Bohle (1993) or Wisner, Blaikie and Cannon (1994) for example have condensed their notion of social vulnerability in widely acknowledged frameworks. The presented megacity resilience framework carries on in this tradition. The framework (cf. fig. 1) conceptualizes vulnerability and resilience in a dialectic relationship. That is, resilience and vulnerability are dynamic, ongoing processes with complex interactions. An analysis of social vulnerability and resilience in megacities begins to capture this dialectic by exploring three continua:

- Local-global: megacities are influenced by interwoven processes on different scales, at the same time having an impact on other scales themselves.
- Formal-ininformal: The functioning of megacities is influenced by the interplay of formal and informal processes as well as various hybrid states in between.
- Socio-ecological: megacities must be conceived as coupled socio-ecological systems.

The framework recognizes that there are zones of interaction between formal and informal processes which overlap in social and ecological areas. Global, national, and local processes also interact in megacities in ways that influence resilience and vulnerability to a range of shocks. An innovative visual feature of the framework is the focus on dynamic processes (circles, undulating cycles) rather than indicators of states (static boxes, directional linear arrows). This reflects some of the modern literature on resilience and vulnerability theory (see e.g. Berkes, Colding and Folke 2003).

The framework conceptualizes these multiple linkages and their influences on resilience and vulnerability in megacities. People and institutions are at the center of the framework, where variance in resilience and vulnerability collide and diverge at different levels. For example, individual households may be resilient to certain formal political changes (i.e. they survive) but vulnerable to certain kinds of risks such as seasonal flooding. At the same instance, institutions may be resilient to risks faced at the household level and in informal processes but vulnerable to political changes that allow the values of competing groups to gain formal decision-making power. Key opposing processes are identified as access points for policy attention. For example, a recognition of the interplay between social and ecological values in slum areas affect vulnerability and resilience at different scales within megacities could be a policy focus in the future.

Strengths of the framework include an explicit recognition that informal and formal systems are not necessarily discrete. For example, there are informal features present in very formal processes, such as the personal networks that facilitate formal business deals.

Similarly, formal elements also influence informal processes, such as the influence of public infrastructure on the growth of slum neighborhoods. The model conceives multiple spaces where the tensions between not only formal and informal, but also social and ecological, and local and global tensions can be played out. The framework thus begins to capture cornerstones of the complex megacity systems observed today. Further, the Megacity Resilience Framework includes both high frequency shocks of low magnitude as well as low frequency shocks with high magnitude. The Megacity Resilience Framework can be applied to various risk-related issues in complex urban settings, including health, water, city planning, environmental degradation, and migration.

The framework describes interacting tensions in a megacity, but does not offer indications of where policy interventions could or should be taken. Nor does the framework suggest an optimum for any of the interacting forces, such as the “right” balance between ecological and social values that would affect urban planning and the balance between built environment and green spaces, for example.

A more detailed analysis of the Megacity Resilience Framework will be published in a forthcoming paper. Those participants of the 2007 Summer Academy on Social Vulnerability who are interested in contributing are requested to contact either Carsten Butsch (carstenbutsch@web.de) or Patrick Sakdapolrak (Sakdapolrak@giub.uni-bonn.de) by November 1st 2007.
Social Vulnerability Focus on Disaster Management Conference

The most concentrated meeting of disaster management practitioners and researchers in the United States focused on the issues of social vulnerability. At the heart of the 31st annual conference in Boulder, Colorado, an expert panel comprised of Munich Re Foundation Chair Tony Oliver-Smith, Director of the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction Salvano Briceno, and gender expert Maureen Fordham discussed the challenges of grappling with ongoing social vulnerability in a society more apt to demand a “quick fix.”

Audience members agreed that social vulnerability is about longer-term issues such as poverty, age, gender, and culture. The mostly U.S. audience discussed the unequal aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, particularly in New Orleans.

Oliver-Smith started the panel by outlining some of the challenges of trying to reduce social vulnerability, not the least being that those in power may not want to improve the situation. Implicit in the definition of social vulnerability is a social critique, Oliver-Smith observed. “These social interactions involve power relations. And these very power relations (can) create obstacles for disaster risk reduction that reaches those most vulnerable to hazards because of their social contexts.”

However there is quite a bit of work that can be done to address social vulnerability.

When asked about the most important factors to reduce social vulnerability, Maureen Fordham noted “socially vulnerable groups do face a lot of problems, but they are not helpless. There are lots of cultures where women’s groups have coping mechanisms such as strong social networks that help them get along when disaster strikes.” Salvano Briceno explained that, in the fight to reduce the risks faced by more vulnerable parts of the population, nothing is more important than “education, education, education.” Briceno went on to express the importance of understanding who is affected by risks and what they might be able to do to reduce a part of the risks they face.

Publications

Working Paper Series

A new Social Vulnerability working paper series has been started, featuring the papers written for the Summer Academy. Papers from the series can be viewed online at www.ehs.unu.edu by mid-November 2007.

SOURCE 6 “Perspectives on Social Vulnerability”

This SOURCE is a selection of papers related to examining theoretical frameworks, contributing factors, and practical measures to address social vulnerability. The title suggests some of the fundamental aspects of the multidisciplinary, debate-filled, and policy relevant research surrounding the impact of shocks groups at risk from multiple stressors. This publication is the first SOURCE dedicated to examining the state of research and emerging perspectives on social vulnerability. The volume is part of a larger effort by UNU-EHS to consolidate research on social vulnerability and facilitate science that increases the understanding, and proposes possible solutions to manifestations of social vulnerability to environmental and social stressors. In response to a growing need for knowledge about social vulnerability UNU-EHS began forging new partnerships to fill knowledge gaps and foster a corps of scientists to address complex questions surrounding the multiple aspects of vulnerability, including social vulnerability. You can download it at www.ehs.unu.edu

Publications—A Look Ahead

Two InterSections and one SOURCE focus on Social Vulnerability

In coming months, a SOURCE will feature some of the best papers from the 2007 Summer Academy on Social Vulnerability. The SOURCE will focus on megacities and the challenges of resilience building. Professor Ursula Oswald Spring (UNAM) and Professor Hans Georg Bohle (University of Bonn) will author InterSections publications. Oswald Spring’s article discusses gender and disasters, while Bohle’s paper addresses coping strategies and environmental change. All of these publications will be available for download at www.ehs.unu.edu and www.munichre-foundation.org towards the end of 2007.

Research Briefs

Social vulnerability research spans across disciplines and thematic areas, but a common thread among much of the current work focuses on risk management strategies among people that face disasters, shocks, and stressors directly. Social vulnerability is an existing condition embedded within the structure of societies, but it is often laid bare when a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina reveals it. In 2006 and 2007, research on social vulnerability flourished. Besides the above introduced publications we would like to introduce to you the following highlights by young professionals.

On the next page of this bulletin you can find an introduction of four promising research papers.
Social Vulnerability Bulletin

YOUNG PROFESSIONALS RESEARCH

Hurricane Katrina and Hispanics – hidden impacts, hidden coping capacity

Byron Real-Lopez comes from Ecuador and studies anthropology in Florida: “Even if there were warnings, people often did not really understand the language. What does “precautionary”, voluntary”, “recommended” or “highly suggested” evacuation mean? The Hispanics shrugged their shoulders and said: “Yo no entiendo esto!” Yet Hispanics had good networks. Although there were more than 100,000 Hispanics in the city of New Orleans when Katrina hit, only 18 persons were killed. Many of them had had a lack of social security and health services before, and had been unfairly paid. I think that their marginalisation strengthened the community, and social vulnerability science tells us that a strong neighbourhood network improves resilience a lot.

Urban planning and flooding in Mumbai, India

Monalisa Chatterjee is a geographer doing her PhD at Rutgers University in the US. Monalisa told us about the dynamics between urban planning, flood management, and governance in the megacity Mumbai. (Bombay) India: “The most important reason that aggravates social vulnerability in Mumbai is lack of public participation. Elected city authorities are not the main decision makers about the city as the state government plays a much larger role here. Citizen’s welfare therefore is not strongly represented in development decisions. For example, after the floods in 2005, city authorities proposed clearing the river channel where squatters live. The city authorities suggest that once this river channel is cleared then flood problem in the city will get resolved. However, the flood issue here is not so simple and it is not clear where the squatters should go or how their vulnerability will be addressed.

Property ownership, widows, and post-earthquake reconstruction in Bam, Iran

Ahoura Meskinazarri is an Iranian PhD studying at King’s College, UK. Ahoura’s work explores how land tenure rights affects post-disaster recovery in Bam, particularly women: “Reconstruction after the Bam earthquake started well. The idea was to rebuild the city in a participatory approach, but this did not work out. Before the earthquake about 80% of the people had land ownership, many of them died in the earthquake along with a lot of ownership records. Iranian widows do not inherit property, houses/land are instead given to relatives living somewhere else. The problem was that reconstruction followed ownership patterns, not the needs of the people living in Bam. Legislation should change to support the widows of disaster victims. This would open the opportunity for the people at risk to make their city less vulnerable.”

Water and urban growth nexus of social vulnerability in African megacities

Joseph Mayunga is an urban scientist from Tanzania, and completing his PhD at Texas A&M University. Joseph about water and urban growth in megacities in Africa: “people in Tanzania are concerned with livelihoods. They need jobs to live, and they find them by moving into the cities. In our capital, Dar-es-Salam, informal settlement is the biggest issue. Some 75% of people living in the city have informal status. The fast-growing urban areas are the key source of vulnerability. People in informal areas are often poor and have almost no chance of escaping the poverty trap. Because of this, people have to accept difficult living conditions. The biggest challenge is water. People in informal settlements usually have no access to sufficient water or sanitation. A lack of clean water leads to growing disease including cholera, many have other health problems. And the city continues growing every day as migrants come in from the countryside.”

IMPRINT:
ViSsP, UNU-EHS
Editorial Team: Koko Warner, Ilona Roberts
Contact: Dr. Koko Warner
UNU-EHS, UN Campus
Hermann-Ehlers-Str. 10
D-53113 Bonn, Germany
Tel.: ++49 (0) 228 815-0226
Fax.: ++49 (0) 228 815-0299
E-Mail: warner@ehs.unu.edu
Website: www.ehs.unu.edu
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UNITED NATIONS ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME
UNU-EHS
Institute for Environment and Human Security

RECRUITMENT FOR 2008 SUMMER ACADEMY
The 2008 Summer Academy will focus on the intersection of environmental change, disasters, vulnerability, and migration. Recruitment for the 2008 academy will be open mid-October 2007. Applications are due no later than 15 January.

Summer Academy Alumni Google Group
We would like to introduce to you the Summer Academy participant’s mailing list. So far, two Summer Academy on Social Vulnerability have taken place in 2006 and 2007, both hosted by UNU-EHS and MRF. The themes: Global water hotspots: Social vulnerability and resilience building; and Megacities: Social Vulnerability and Resilience.

To subscribe, please send an email to: socialvulnerability-subscribe@googlegroups.com

In case of difficulties please send an email to Saut Sagala saut.sagala@gmail.com or sagala@drs.dpri.kyoto-u.ac.jp

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