"Social Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis" Workshop

Geneva, 25-26 May 2004

Marko Kokic/IFRC

Discussion paper and workshop report

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PROVENTION CONSORTIUM

Foreword

The subject of community risk assessment is of particular interest to the work of the ProVention Consortium and its efforts to improve the accuracy and quality of the risk assessment process. An effective assessment at the community level will contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and level of risks that vulnerable people face; where these risks come from; who will be the worst affected; what means are available at all levels to reduce the risks and what initiatives can be undertaken to reduce the vulnerability and strengthen the capacities of people at risk.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance and potential benefits of risk assessment at the community level, the methodologies and standard practices are not systematically factored into the main risk assessment process. One reason is that the data concerning the different assessment methodologies have not been systematically compiled, compared and analysed. Another reason is the lack of knowledge of their relative accuracy, effectiveness and quality. These important constraints can only be addressed by comparative analysis, interdisciplinary research and, above all, the sharing of knowledge, learning and experience between the community of actors involved in risk assessment.

The “Tools for Community Risk Assessment and Action Planning” project aims at reviewing current tools for community risk assessment and identifying gaps and elements of “good practice”. A web-based register collecting community risk assessment tools and methodologies has been developed on the ProVention website. This will at a later stage be supported by guidance notes. Also a compendium of case studies on the subject will be developed.

On May 25-26, 2004 an International Workshop on ‘Social Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis’ (VCA), was held in Geneva at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The workshop brought together some 26 leading academics and practitioners from different organizations and countries, with representation from Central and Latin America, Southern Africa, South and South-east Asia, who contributed to the initiative through presentation of case studies, research and workshop discussion groups. Participants highlighted key elements of good practice in VCA but also identified a wide range of technical, social, conceptual and developmental gaps that await closure.

This document contains the workshop discussion paper and report, providing a summary of the key issues raised and the main conclusions of the international workshop.

Social Vulnerability & Capacity Analysis: An Overview

Discussion paper prepared for the
ProVention Consortium Workshop
at IFRC Geneva on May 25-26, 2004

Ian Davis, Bruno Haghebaert & David Peppiatt

*"Development is the process
by which vulnerabilities are reduced
and capacities increased"*

Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow, 1988

Preamble

This overview paper provides an outline of key issues, themes and questions to be considered at the ProVention Consortium Social Vulnerability & Capacity Analysis (VCA) Workshop in Geneva on May 25-26. The paper is prepared as a background document for workshop participants with an aim to provide context for discussion on the central themes of the workshop. The paper includes, in Annex 1, a set of twelve guiding principles on VCA, each leading to pertinent questions to be addressed during the course of the workshop. Annex 2 and 3 include useful frameworks for VCA and an overview of key sectors.

The subject of VCA is of particular interest to the work of the ProVention Consortium and its efforts to improve the accuracy and quality of the risk assessment process, in particular the critical role of community risk assessment. ProVention is, therefore, currently collaborating with a number of Consortium partners, in particular the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and Organisation of American States (OAS), on an initiative to develop practices in VCA in order to strengthen community based disaster risk reduction. The workshop is an important part of this wider effort to improve learning and practice in the assessment and analysis of vulnerability and capacity. Indeed, there have been relatively few opportunities to bring together leading academics and practitioners from different organisations with knowledge and field experience to look critically at the use of tools and learn from case study experience with the ambitious aim to identify and improve good practice in VCA.

Introduction: Vulnerability *and* Capacity

In recent years, there has been an apparent concentration of efforts by both academics and practitioners to understand the complex nature of social vulnerability and capacity. In certain respects, this has been in response to the perceived imbalance of focus of attention on physical vulnerabilities and a neglect of analysis of the social, economic and political factors that so often drive vulnerability. The increased attention to the social dimensions of risk assessment is contributing to a better identification of specific vulnerable groups or individuals as well as an improved analysis of the socio-economic conditions that create vulnerability.

A broad consensus has also emerged within the disaster and development communities that it is essential to consider an assessment of vulnerability in parallel to a measurement of capacity in all sectors. The use of the concept of capacity emerged in response to the negativity of the term vulnerability: to speak of people as being vulnerable was to treat them as passive victims and ignore the many capacities, resources and assets people possess to resist, cope with and recover from disaster shocks they experience. This distinction between vulnerability and capacity has been criticized by certain authors as being unnecessary, since the term "vulnerability" is often used as a composite expression to describe both negative as well as positive elements. However, capacity and vulnerability cannot always be considered as two ends of a spectrum. Some capacities are not the opposite of vulnerabilities and certain low-level vulnerability characteristics do not figure on the higher scale of the capacities. For the sake of clarity, we therefore propose to confine all the resources and capabilities of communities under the term "capacity" and to restrict the word vulnerability to factors that contribute to putting people at risk.

A diverse range of vulnerability and capacity assessment tools have been developed and field tested, mainly by NGOs and community-based organisations, with a particular emphasis on participatory and people oriented approaches. Indeed, the influence of social development methodologies, such as participatory rural assessment techniques, is very much evident in VCA. A key element, therefore, of the VCA approach is the dual interest in both vulnerability and capacity. Examples include:

- The CVA matrix developed by Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow's in "*Rising from the Ashes, Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*" which has formed the template for many of the currently used assessment tools *(see Annex 2).*
- IFRC VCA toolkit which has been used for assessing both the capacities and vulnerabilities of the communities in which the RC works as well as the organizational capacities and vulnerabilities of their member National Societies.
- The *Citizen's Disaster Response Center and Network (CDRC/N)* in the Philippines has adopted the CVA methodology since the early 1990s, as part of their Citizenry-Based and Development-Oriented Disaster Response (CBDO-DR) approach
- The *La Red* Network has build up considerable experience in participatory community risk assessment in Latin America.
- The *Peri Peri* network has actively promoted the use of VCA in southern Africa.
- *Tearfund* and partner organisations in India, such as the Discipleship Centre in New Delhi and the Evangelical Fellowship PF India Commission on Relief, are currently involved in VCA activities.
- OXFAM developed a Participatory Capacities and Vulnerabilities Assessment (PCVA) tool.
- ActionAid has been engaged in Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA).
- CARE has developed a Household Livelihood Security Assessment tool kit.

However, despite this growing recognition of the importance and potential benefits of VCA, the methodologies and standard practices are not systematically factored into the main risk assessment process. One reason is that the data concerning the different assessment methodologies have not been compiled, compared and analysed. Another reason is the lack of knowledge of their relative accuracy, effectiveness and quality. These important constraints can only be addressed by comparative analysis, interdisciplinary research and, above all, the sharing of knowledge, learning and experience between the community of actors involved in VCA.

This workshop, therefore, provides a rich opportunity to enhance learning on different VCA approaches, highlight elements of good practice, analyse tools and data, identify gaps in methodologies and examine ways to integrate VCA into the wider risk assessment process. The focus of the workshop will be on practical applications of VCA in the context of disaster risk assessment and risk reduction. The subject of disaster vulnerability often attracts much academic discourse and a focus on conceptual frameworks. The focus of this workshop, however, will be to earth the theory into practice with an aim to provide practical advice on effective tools and approaches to be used by communities, NGOs and local actors. This deliberate practice-oriented approach is reflected in the number of practitioners who have been invited to participate in the workshop as well as in the nature of the topics to be discussed.

The main issues and themes to be addressed at the workshop are summarised in the following sections.

Purpose of VCA

The primary purpose of an overall vulnerability and capacity analysis is its use as a diagnostic tool to provide analytical data to support better informed decisions on the planning and implementation of risk reduction measures. An effective VCA will contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and level of risks that vulnerable people face; where these risks come from; who will be the worst affected; what means are available at all levels to reduce the risks and what initiatives can be undertaken to reduce the vulnerability and strengthen the capacities of people at risk. VCA tools are used to identify and measure levels of risk for use in decision making on ways to achieve safe conditions. In addition VCA has many uses beyond the risk/ disaster context, since assessments can provide vital data to communities and governments that contributes valuable assistance in social planning and resource allocation.

The objective of a social VCA is to identify specific vulnerable groups/individuals, based on key social characteristics such as gender, age, health status, disability, ethnicity and so forth. The process also includes an analysis of patterns of density, livelihood security and occupational activities that increase the vulnerability of certain households and communities. Capacity assessment aims at identifying a wide diversity of resources: community coping strategies, local leadership and institutions, existing social capital which may contribute to risk reduction efforts, skills, labour, community facilities, preparedness stocks, a local evacuation plan, etc. An additional and often overlooked aspect of a participatory risk assessment is the local perception of risk which can play a key role in determining risk and community prioritisation of mitigation measures. The workshop will seek consensus on the primary purpose and objectives of a VCA and some definition of the core components of VCA.

Scale of VCA

Vulnerability, by its nature, is always “area specific”. While hazards may be mapped at an international, regional or national scale, vulnerabilities are by their nature localised. VCAs have therefore to be confined to a specific community, village or town and may not be easily applicable in the context of the complexities of a large metropolitan area or a nation unless it is a tiny state such as a small island country. The principle being that the smaller the scale of concern the more accurate and the greater the value of the exercise. Thus where there is a demand for large scale VCA this requires the problem to be disaggregated to small measurable units. Recognising that vulnerability is best assessed at small scale localised levels where subtle variables can be identified and measured, what answer is given to authorities who wish to measure the VCA of an entire city or region? Or put more simply, how can VCA be undertaken in large areas?

Participatory Approach

It is important to emphasise that the *process* of VCA may be of equal long-term importance as the *tools* that are adopted. The *process* is one of participatory partnership and active long-term engagement with communities in defining their problems and opportunities. It is also a therapeutic process of self-analysis and self-discovery by a community of its latent strengths that will build collective self confidence. The participation of vulnerable groups in the planning, implementation and analysis components is an essential feature of any VCA. Active participation will provide more reliable and qualitative understanding of the vulnerabilities and capacities of the groups concerned. Communities generally understand local realities and contexts better than outsiders. If 'at-risk' groups are involved in all stages of the VCA process, a stronger foundation will be created for the development of sustainable programmes for risk reduction. Participatory techniques for data collection and analysis, such as PRA and RRA, are therefore considered to be appropriate tools for conducting a VCA. In this regard, VCA is both a process and an assessment tool. What are the implications of a 'process' and 'tool' approach to VCA and how can both features contribute to effective risk reduction measures?

Tools used to conduct a VCA

The tools used for participatory data gathering rely heavily on PRA and RRA techniques. These tools include the following:

- Secondary data review
- Consensus panels
- Semi-structured interviews (group interview, focus group discussion, individual interview, key-informant interview)
- Story Telling
- Drawings
- Using drawing to elicit verbal information from the artist's audience.
- Direct observation
- Transect walks
- Spatial, hazard/risk and capacity/resource mapping
- Wealth ranking
- Institutional and social network analysis, capacity analysis of people's organisation
- Daily time use charts and seasonal calendars
- Historic profiles and historical visualization
- Livelihood/coping strategies analysis
- Gender Analysis
- Role plays
- Problem trees

The effectiveness and relevance of the tools will differ according to the local context and hazard concerned. What tools have proved to be of particular relevance and effectiveness when carrying out a VCA?

Who should undertake VCA?

A recurring problem to the implementation of VCAs is the observation of government officials and international NGOs that they do not have sufficient trained staff to undertake assessments or to analyse them. This lack of qualified assessors has seriously hampered the development of social vulnerability and capacity assessment over the last decade. A possible solution to this constraint is to seek to de-professionalize the assessment process through the use of skilled and experienced persons who can be found in most communities. These may usefully include community leaders,

local teachers, agricultural extensionists, religious leaders, midwives and other civil society groups. However, community involvement does not remove the need for expertise and leadership where experienced professionals will train local assessors and develop good assessment checklists as well as templates for assessment. Clearly, a critical challenge for many organisations active in VCA is the availability of these experienced assessors and how to de-professionalize the assessment process.

How to measure vulnerability of specific groups?

Over the years government agencies and NGOs have developed long and detailed checklists of potential vulnerable groups and individuals. Typically social, demographic and economic characteristics, such as gender, age, health status and disability, ethnicity or race or nationality, caste or religion, and socio-economic status are the focus of attention. The use of the "checklist approach" however is not undisputed:

- Some characteristics and vulnerabilities change over time or change with the life cycle (e.g. age).
- How to be sure that the list of "key social characteristics" is complete?
- When the list is complete, how to weight the different characteristics?
- Some vulnerabilities may be countered in part by capabilities. The aged as a vulnerable group, for instance, may possess vivid recollections of past disasters that can add to the risk assessment process; they may have a greater life experience to draw from and have better knowledge of coping strategies; they may have a wide network of family and friends.
- Not all seniors, very young, women or people with disabilities are equally vulnerable. Some may in fact be more adept at responding to and recovering from disaster than their general grouping or population category might first indicate. Vulnerability is in most cases not determined by a single taxonomy but by a concatenation of characteristics. Social vulnerability is often the result of very complex processes which can as a result only be adequately assessed through a detailed situational analysis.

There is a need to critically review the relative strengths and weaknesses of the checklist and situational analysis approaches in order to determine the most effective and feasible ways to measure vulnerability of specific groups.

Who can use VCA data?

In principle, all stakeholders involved in the risk assessment and risk reduction process can make use of the data obtained from a vulnerability and capacity assessment, including:

- Disaster planners and disaster managers
- Emergency management staff
- Communities at-risk
- Professional groups such as engineers, geologists, architects, sociologists,
- economists etc
- NGO staff
- Political leaders
- Academic bodies
- Private Sector actors

However, in practice, VCA data is not always made readily available often because of the political implications for local or national authorities or because of the organisational interests of those who carry out the assessments. The workshop will promote the need for total transparency in the management of the risk assessment process so that those 'at risk' are made aware of risk

information. Can such a policy of transparency be established and maintained? How and where should risk assessment information be stored and disseminated to all stakeholders in a transparent and accountable way?

Linking VCA and livelihoods

The level of vulnerability of a household or individual is determined by how weak or strong their livelihoods are, what occupational activities they are engaged in, how good their access is to a range of assets that provide the basis for their livelihood strategy and how useful their social capital and different institutions are in providing social protection. Although the key components of the livelihoods approach are present in vulnerability and capacity assessment practice, the sustainable livelihood terminology and approach is not yet very widely integrated in the context of community risk assessment. In a recent DFID study *"Social Vulnerability, Sustainable Livelihoods and Disasters"* it is proposed to strengthen the links between vulnerability analysis and methods for sustainable livelihood analysis.

In investigating capacities within a VCA particular emphasis is needed to establish the threats to sustainable livelihoods, as well as the converse, the security of livelihoods. This requires an identification, measurement and understanding of the 'coping value' of five categories of 'capital':

- *human* (skills, knowledge etc.)
- *social* (networks, institutions etc.)
- *physical* (infrastructure, technology, equipment etc.)
- *financial* (savings and credit)
- *natural* (natural resources including land and water)

The workshop will explore the links between the VCA process and the assessment tools needed to identify and measure the five forms of capital listed above which are often recognised as the key dimensions of sustainable livelihoods. In this respect, we will examine the opportunities and relevance for using a livelihoods-based approach to VCA.

Integrating VCA with other assessments

As the above point on livelihoods highlights, the social dimension of VCA does not exist in an isolated vacuum but ideally needs to be integrated with other risk assessment processes:

1. Integration of VCA with physical, economic and environmental assessment

VCA has been used particularly to assess social vulnerability, but it can be usefully extended to cover all key sectors. Social VCA is only one element in the overall process of vulnerability assessment that needs to include a wider range of concerns such as:

- *Physical, (buildings, infrastructure, critical facilities)*
- *Economic, (livelihoods, economic assets, businesses, commercial and industrial sectors)*
- *Environmental, (forestry, agriculture, animals, fisheries, eco-systems)*

A multi and inter-disciplinary approach is therefore essential in order to merge social, technical, economic and environmental data. When integrating data from different sectors, close attention has to be given to the accuracy and consistency of data, as they will often be collected by assessment teams using different survey techniques. This ultimately requires more integrated teamwork and interdisciplinary training in risk assessment. But is this feasible and desirable?

The matrix in Annex 3 attempts to indicate how vulnerability and capacity can be related to all sectors by citing some typical examples in each category. In theory, all need to be integrated into a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of vulnerability and capacity with an aim to explore the links and synergies between the elements of the natural and human made environment.

2. Integration of VCA with assessment of other risks

In societies faced with multiple threats to lives and livelihoods (such as HIV AIDS, conflict, climate change etc.) VCA has to become a fully integrated process that addresses all threats. These threats are often interrelated, for example HIVAids leading to reduced resilience to the threat of drought. This suggests that only an integrated approach dealing in a comprehensive manner with multiple risks to human security will be able to provide adequate protection to lives and livelihoods. The workshop will learn from VCA experiences that have encompassed a broad range of risks beyond just those concerned with natural hazards.

3. Integration between pre-disaster VCA with post-disaster damage and needs assessment

In too many instances, different groups conduct pre and post disaster assessments. This artificial separation is unfortunate and wastes vital knowledge and effort. There are major benefits in the full integration of VCA undertaken pre-disaster with post-disaster damage and needs assessments. Clearly the assessments of damage and social needs after disaster represent a far more accurate measurement of vulnerability and resources than any predictive assessment. In addition, the data from VCA, concerning risks as well as resources collected before a disaster, can be of decisive value in the conduct of an effective disaster relief operation. However, it is essential for damage and needs assessment data to be used with caution and discretion in relation to the assessment of vulnerability of unaffected regions of a given country. Therefore, both pre and post disaster assessments need to be under integrated management.

A critical challenge, therefore, will be to avoid the isolation of VCA and ensure that the social dimensions of risk assessment become fully integrated with other assessment processes.

Connecting VCA to the cycle of disaster planning

From a disaster management perspective, VCA needs to become part of the disaster planning process. In theory, a VCA contribute essential data for action planning that leads into the implementation of risk reduction measures. When VCA is conducted without the expectation of disaster planning or the creation of safety measures it negatively raises local expectations that can not be fulfilled with consequent long-term community damage.

The traditional Disaster Planning Cycle (illustrated in the diagram below) is a cyclical rather than linear process and involves six fundamental steps or stages:

Stage 1. **Initiation of Disaster Planning**

Stage 2. **Risk Assessment-** This is a three stage process with VCA being the second stage: (i) Hazard Mapping; (ii) VCAs for all key sectors; (iii) Loss Estimation Scenarios

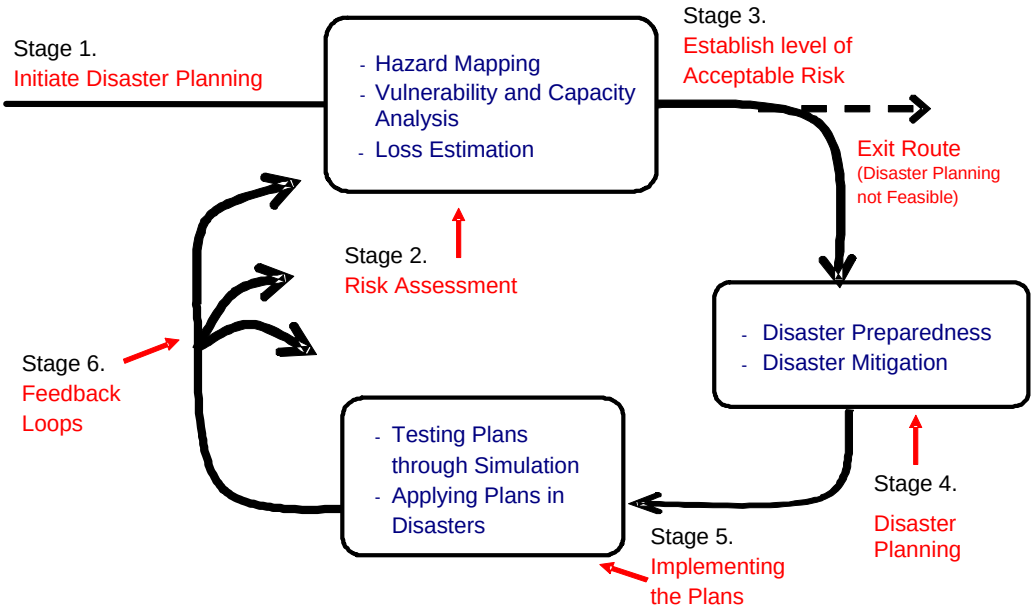
Stage 3. **Defining levels of Acceptable Risk-** This is a political process where political leaders make decisions on the level of protection to plan for. These decisions are based on the data provided from Risk Assessment. (At this point in the Planning Cycle some societies may be forced to exit from further planning or implementation on grounds of cost)

Stage 4. **Planning Risk Reduction Measures and Disaster Plans-** The planning process covers both structural (physical) and non structural elements (social/ administrative)

Stage 5. **Implementing the Plans-** This can be undertaken through the testing of disaster plans through simulation exercises or through their application in disaster situations.

Stage 6. **Feedback Loops-** As plans are tested or applied key lessons will be fed back into stages 2, 3, 4 and 5 to continually improve the system of disaster planning.

The Cycle of Disaster Planning:



VCA is in many cases still considered to be a stand alone exercise which does not necessarily lead to risk analysis, action planning and the implementation of risk reduction measures. What steps need to be taken to ensure that VCA is fully connected to the disaster planning cycle?

Assessing root causes of vulnerability

A concern for assessing social vulnerability also implies a need to analyse the social and political construction of risk that generates vulnerability. VCA, therefore, moves beyond a narrow concern for unsafe conditions to an assessment of the social, economic and potentially political factors that are the root causes of vulnerability of a specific group. If VCA and the ensuing disaster reduction actions are confined to addressing the cosmetics of unsafe conditions, without tackling the fundamental pressures that create the patterns of vulnerability, then vulnerability will persist and recur even if symptoms are rectified. This raises a major challenge in measuring vulnerability and capacity. Future assessors of vulnerability will need to expand their data collection by encouraging their informants to look at the social construction of risk. As VCA moves towards causal factors, it will inevitably enter the harsh realities of the political world. Thus, the assessment of root causes will lead to the need for political advocacy to revise some policies and strengthen others. How can the root causes of vulnerability be identified and addressed when the root causes are ‘mega-forces’ that may be systemic within a given society? What are the risks involved for the 'at risk' community and VCA assessors in analysing the social or political factors that create their vulnerability?

Capturing local coping strategies in VCA

Local coping strategies are considered to be key factors in determining a community’s resilience to natural hazards. They are often highly complex and may involve social, economic, technical, agricultural and cultural activities which often vary according to region, community, household, gender, age and class. Coping mechanisms are often internalised and invisible to outsiders. In some cases communities may even be unaware of its importance. An in-depth knowledge of the social, cultural and political context is therefore required to adequately assess the importance and effectiveness of these strategies. Involving local NGO staff and community members as assessors in social vulnerability and capacity assessments may prove to be an effective approach to capture this local knowledge and mechanisms. What techniques and tools have been used effectively to collect data on coping strategies?

Limitations of VCA

While it has been encouraging to note the strong interest in VCA by the disaster community in recent years, there is a danger of false assumptions being made that VCA can apply in all geographical situations and to all hazards. One of the underlying assumptions is that there is a 'community' ready to assess. However this may not always be the case. For example in the growing number of vast urban conurbations, the rapid turnover of residents prevents the growth of stable communities. Indeed, the very term 'community' can prove to be a myth for many urban dwellers and, thus, challenges the notion of community risk assessment and community-based risk reduction.

A further limitation is to recognise that VCA may need to have a low priority concern in relation to certain conditions. For example in assessing seismic vulnerability social considerations are not the primary area of concern. Since 98% of all earthquake deaths and injuries occur as a result of building failure it follows that the key vulnerability and capacity issue relates to an assessment of the physical vulnerability of buildings and human settlements. How people relate to buildings in terms of patterns of occupancy and density and their means of escape may thus become secondary considerations.

Furthermore, gaps in the assessment methodology need to be addressed. These include the lack of an agreed set of indicators of social vulnerability and a lack of understanding and practical experience concerning ways to merge data from a social VCA with other sectors of vulnerability.

There are, of course, other limitations that need to be recognised. It is hoped that the workshop will provide a forum for critical reflection on the limitations of VCA as well as the benefits.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the rationale for VCA tools as well as their creation, application and fine-tuning. This workshop offers a unique opportunity to make an important contribution to the global community seeking to reduce disaster risks by giving advice on which future tools, and the way they are used will be most effective in future assessments, and we hope that this paper will stimulate constructive thought and productive discussion. However, it is important to remember that tools have their limitations. They are essentially 'enablers' to serve a purpose, and they should not be confused with a 'product', 'aim' or 'destination'. Therefore the test of this workshop's effectiveness will need to await the *use* and *value* of the tools in planning and implementing risk reduction measures that save lives as well as protecting livelihoods and property from future disasters.

Annex 1

Twelve guiding principles and key questions concerning VCA

1. Always link vulnerability *and* capacity

There is great value to all stakeholders in linking vulnerability and capacity within an integrated assessment. This is fundamentally a therapeutic process for communities as they become aware of the positive solutions that come from *within* their own families and communities to the threats that are identified in VCA. It is also an effective tool to avoid importing unnecessary external assistance that can lead to the creation of damaging dependency relationships between vulnerable communities and external assisting bodies.

Question:
Is it desirable to have a standard methodology in universal use for VCA, or is it preferable (and more realistic) to accept and seek to use a multiplicity of assessment tools and methodologies?

2. Prioritise 'high-risk' groups

The documentation of disaster experience over the past half century has revealed a consistent pattern of vulnerability for certain groups in society who persistently suffer to a disproportionate degree from disaster impact. These high-risk groups may include:

- The victims of official or cultural prejudice, (such as ethnic or religious minorities) leading to inequitable access to resources,
- Low caste groups
- Certain occupations (for example, fishermen in cyclone prone areas)
- Women in certain societies,
- Babies and small children,
- Those with special needs such as disability,
- The sick,
- The elderly.

In some societies these high risk groups may form the majority of the population.

The principal is to recognise that while these groups will form the main focus of a vulnerability assessment, they also contain key capacities. For example, the elderly, who may be vulnerable due to their lack of mobility or from the loss of their basic faculties may possess the collective memory of a given societies coping strategies as well as detailed knowledge of hazard locations and impact patterns.

Questions:
Does the fact that certain high-risk groups have been identified as the most vulnerable imply that they are not the place to look for capacities? Is there a need to develop a specific list of most vulnerable groups and individuals for each hazard type and what have been the experiences with the use of checklists? Would the identification of the most vulnerable groups and individuals benefit from a situational analysis approach?

3. Integrate VCA

There are four areas where VCA needs to be integrated into wider contexts:

1. **Integration of Sectors**
   Social VCA is only one element in the overall process of vulnerability assessment that needs to include a wider range of concerns such as economic, physical and environmental factors. All need to be integrated into a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of vulnerability and capacity.

2. **Integration in the Planning Process**
   A further aspect of integration concerns the need to avoid VCA becoming isolated from its planning context. It provides the essential data for action planning that leads into the implementation of risk reduction measures. When VCA is conducted without the expectation of disaster planning or the creation of safety measures it negatively raises local expectations that can not be fulfilled with lasting community damage.

3. **Integration with other Threats**
   In societies faced with multiple threats to lives and livelihoods (such as HIV AIDS, conflict, climate change etc.) VCA has to become a fully integrated process that addresses all threats.

4. **Integration between Pre Disaster VCA with Post-Disaster damage and needs assessment**
   In too many instances different groups conduct pre and post disaster assessments. However this artificial separation is unfortunate and wastes vital knowledge and effort. It is essential that the vital knowledge gained from post- disaster assessments that reveal actual, as opposed to the anticipated vulnerability that is revealed in VCA is built into the overall risk picture

Question:
To achieve the high level of integration needed in the four areas noted, assessors of VCA need to be aware of the wider sectoral, planning and threat environments and to be prepared to collaborate and coordinate with wider communities. How can this growth in knowledge and change in attitude and behaviour in assessors be best achieved?

4. Adopt a livelihoods perspective

In investigating capacities within a VCA particular emphasis is needed to establish the threats to sustainable livelihoods, as well as the converse, the security of livelihoods. This requires an identification, measurement and understanding of the 'coping value' of five categories of 'capital':

- *human* (skills, knowledge etc.)
- *social* (networks, institutions etc.)
- *physical* (infrastructure, technology, equipment etc.)
- *financial* (savings and credit)
- *natural* (natural resources including land and water)

Questions:
What are the most appropriate assessment tools needed to identify and measure the five forms of 'capital', and what would be the added value of developing/using a livelihood-based approach to VCA? What techniques and tools have participants used to collect data on coping strategies?

5. De-professionalise the assessment process

VCA does not necessarily require the services of highly skilled assessors. However it does need well trained local community members, (such as agricultural extensionists, medical personnel, teachers, religious leaders etc.) who are locally respected and have the confidence of the community. Such individuals are able to gather information that may be unobtainable from external professional assessors. The training is essential to familiarise assessors with appropriate data collection methodologies as well as to ensure that a consistency of approach is maintained by different assessors.

Question:
What should be the criteria needed in selecting local personnel to undertake VCA and should locally selected assessors be paid or should this be a voluntary role?

6. Aim for accuracy but live with uncertainty

Undertaking VCA inevitably involves dealing with high levels of uncertainty, but this reality must not prevent a process taking place that seeks for high levels of accuracy and consistency.

Questions:
What advice needs to be imparted to assessors as they deal with the lack of crucial information needed to complete an effective VCA? (It has been wisely said that "it is better to be approximately right rather than being precisely wrong").
How can accuracy and consistency be maintained when using non-professional assessors?

7. Focus on the local

Social vulnerability is by its nature a localised condition where one household may be more or less vulnerable than their immediate neighbours. Therefore to be useful VCA has to be confined to small geographical areas. This is to avoid the risk of averaging the extremes of high and low risk and thus creating a distorted overall assessment. As a general rule, the smaller the scale of a VCA, the greater the likelihood of accurate assessment. If VCA is required for large geographical areas then this can best be obtained by breaking the area down into small manageable localities for assessment and gradually assembling a greater picture in the manner of a jig-saw.

Question:
If the stated principle is correct concerning the need for small scale localised assessment of VCA, what answer is given to authorities who wish to measure the VCA of an entire city or geographical region?

8. Consider VCA as process and tool

VCA is both a process as well as being a tool. The *process* is one of participatory partnership and active long-term engagement with communities in defining their problems and opportunities. The *tool* is to identify and measure levels of risk for use in decision making on ways to achieve safe conditions.

Question:
In operational terms what are the practical implications of VCA being both a 'process' as well as being a 'tool'?

9. Be creative and flexible

VCA should not be regarded as merely a technical process. Rather, it is a series of powerful developmental tools with the potential to identify varied threats as well as a wide range of local resources to address them. The effective use of these tools requires a creative, flexible, developmental approach that is understood and accepted by the community being assessed.

Question:
Recognising the developmental aspects of VCA that requires a creative and flexible approach it is vital for the training of assessors to be trained in such skills and attitudes. How can this best be achieved?

10. Be transparent

The results of VCA need to be made readily available and to be understood by all communities that are 'at risk'. A policy of total transparency is needed in the identification, collection, storage and dissemination of risk information.

Question:
Where should risk assessment information be stored and displayed to permit wide access to the concerned public and what are the likely social, economic and political consequences of a transparent approach?

11. Look at tangibles and intangibles

VCA covers the identification and measurement of a diversity of vulnerabilities and capacities. Some *tangible* elements can be relatively easily identified and measured such as the identification of high-risk social groups. However in contrast other patterns of *intangible* vulnerability or capacity are much more difficult to identify and assess, such as the range and variety of individual perceptions and adjustments to risk that include a rich diversity. Therefore, creativity is needed to develop and apply a variety of specific tools to assess **all** aspects of vulnerability and capacity whether visible or not.

Question:
Recognising that standard data collection approaches are biased towards the location of tangible and often visible information, what tools , or other approaches are most appropriate to gather complex intangible information such as personal risk perception or individual coping mechanisms?

12. Consider symptoms and causes

To be effective the scope of VCA needs to cover both 'symptoms' (social patterns of vulnerability and capacity) as well as 'root causes' of vulnerability. This is essential because patterns of vulnerability that can be addressed through risk reduction measures will almost certainly recur on a regular basis unless the causal factors, (or root causes) are identified and addressed.

(VCA confined to symptoms is not dissimilar to a medical diagnosis that is confined to what can be observed on the surface expression of an ailment on a human body. This approach would be considered to be ludicrous to both the person being examined as well as to the medical professions, yet most VCA that is confined to symptoms is of limited value due to its partial assessment and restricted analysis)

Questions:
How can information on the root causes of vulnerability be obtained and is it likely that local personnel will possess valid information on such factors that may be far removed from them in geographical or political terms? How can information that may emerge from the collection of data on root causes be used?

Annex 2

Frameworks used to conduct a VCA

There are three major **frameworks** used by actors involved in vulnerability and capacity analysis:

Framework 1: Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA)

This matrix was first developed in 1988 by Anderson and Woodrow in "*Rising from the Ashes*". The basis of the CVA framework is a simple, yet ingenious six-box matrix for viewing people's vulnerabilities and capacities in three broad, interrelated areas: physical/material, social/organisational and motivational/attitudinal.

Capacities and vulnerabilities analysis matrix

	Vulnerabilities	Capacities
Physical/Material What productive resources, skills and hazards exist		
Social/ Organisational What are the relations and organization among people?		
Motivational/ Attitudinal How does the community view its ability to create change		

Anderson, Mary and Woodrow, Peter (1988) "*Rising from the Ashes, Development Strategies in Times of Disaster*". IT Publications: London, page 12

Framework 2: The Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA) tool

This was developed by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the early 1990's. According to the IFRC a full and useful assessment must involve the following three essential stages:

Step 1: Identifying potential "threats" (based in nature, violence and deterioration).

Step 2: Identifying social vulnerabilities (three characteristics make certain groups more vulnerable than others: proximity and exposure, poverty and exclusion or marginalisation).

Step 3: Assessing capacities and strengths (physical/material, social/organisational and skills and attitudes).

Some elements in the VCA framework have been borrowed from the CVA Matrix but the IFRC tool contains enough specific elements to be considered a separate tool. See IFRC Toolkit.

Framework 3: The 'Crunch' Model: (Hazard x Vulnerability = Disaster or Risk of Disaster)

This model was first introduced by Ian Davis in *'Shelter after Disaster'* in 1978 but was further refined in 1994 in Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis and Ben Wisner's book: *'At Risk, Peoples Vulnerability to Natural Disasters'.* The model is descriptive rather than being an assessment tool. However an assessment methodology based on the concept of the model is being field tested in Eritrea and India in 2004 by Tearfund staff and their partner organisations.

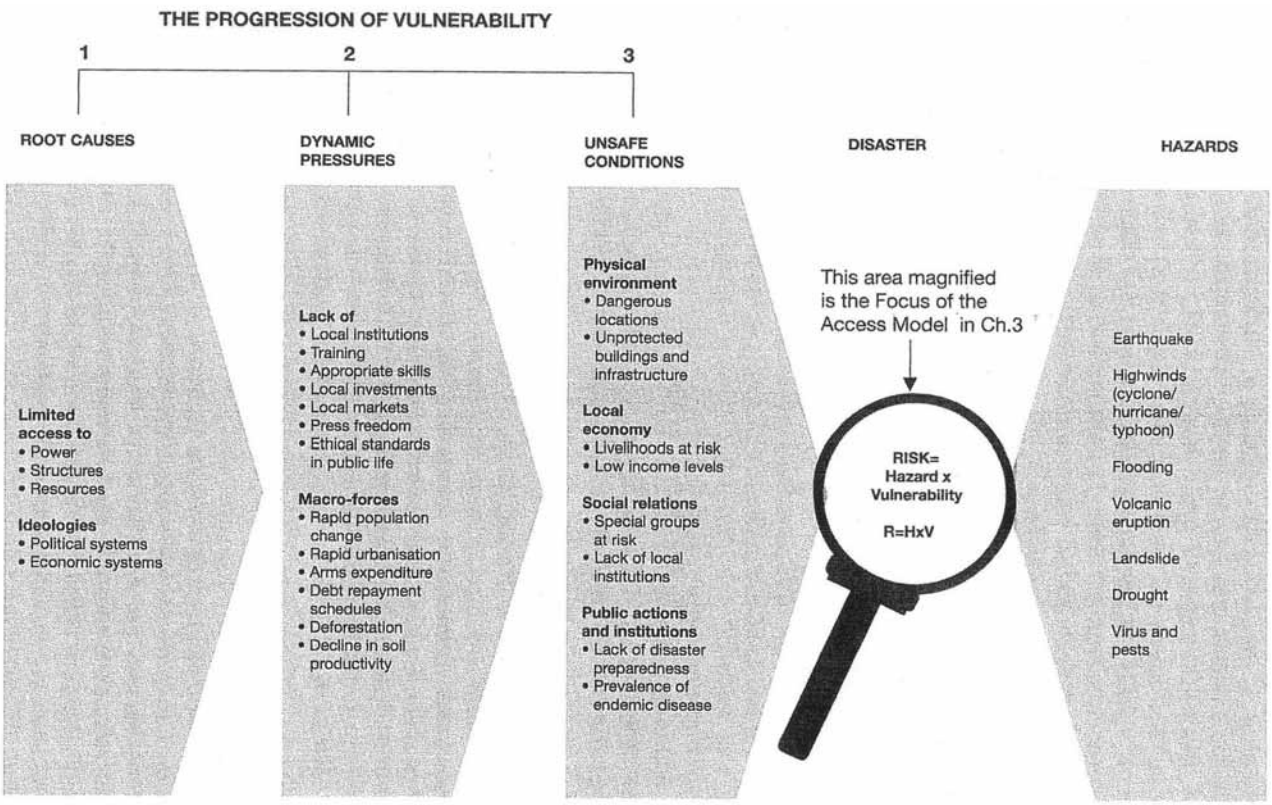


Figure 2.1 Pressure and Release (PAR) model: the progression of vulnerability

The crunch model adds an additional dimension to Frameworks 1-2 since it illustrates the 'Progression of Vulnerability' in three developing stages: 'Root Causes', 'Dynamic Pressures' and 'Unsafe Conditions'. In contrast Frameworks 1-3 confine their focus to the third stage 'Unsafe Conditions' but they simply use the term 'Vulnerability' as the heading for various elements.

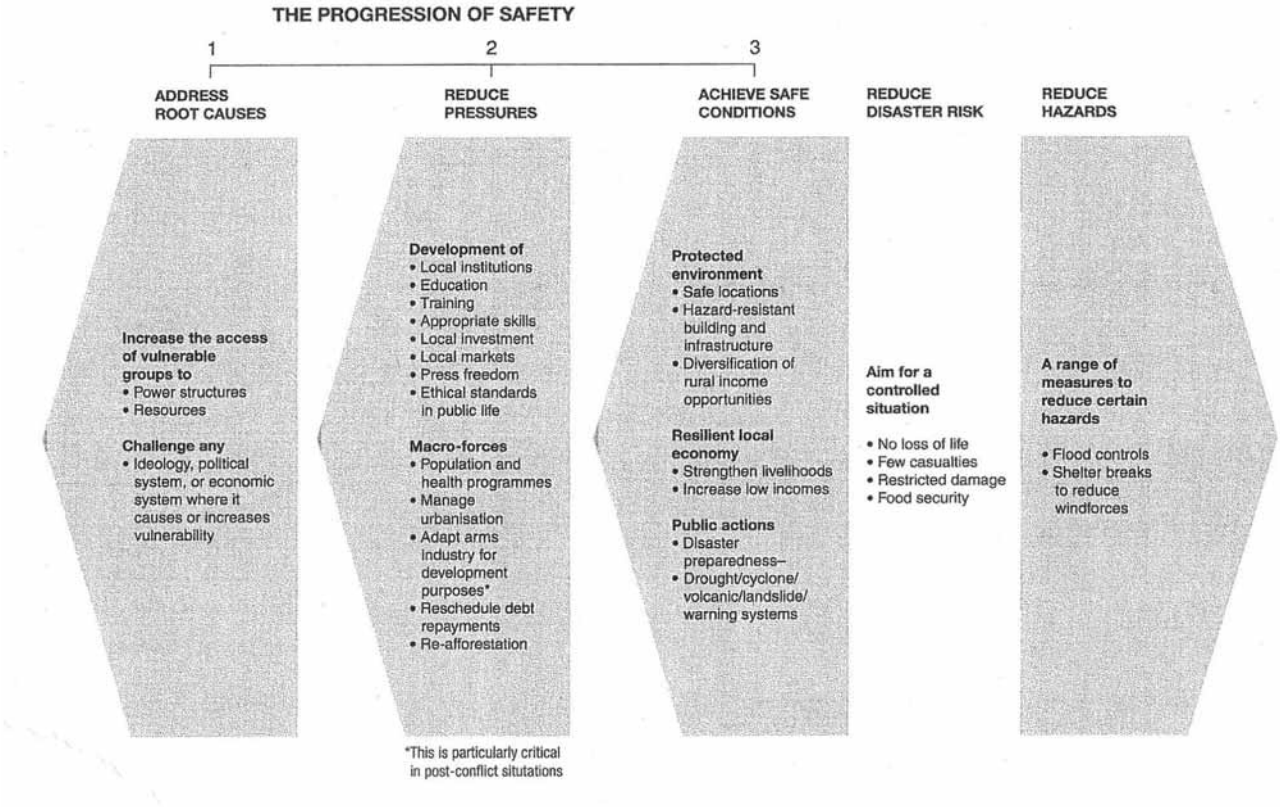


Figure 9.4 The release of 'pressures' to reduce disasters: progression of safety

The ‘Progression of Safety’ describes a range of capacities and these are described in the Release Model. To summarise, the Crunch Model describes ‘Hazards’ and ‘Vulnerabilities’ while the Release model emphasises ‘Hazards’ and ‘Capacities’.

Further development work is needed to devise a VCA that identifies and measures the elements set out in the varied phases in the development of vulnerability or safety described in the crunch and release models. This work will be informed from the results obtained from the field testing conducted in 2004.

Annex 3

Vulnerabilities & capacities of different sectors

Sectors	Vulnerabilities	Capacities
Social	* occupation of unsafe areas * high density occupation of sites and buildings * lack of mobility * low perceptions of risk * vulnerable occupations * vulnerable groups and individuals * corruption * lack of education * poverty * lack of VCA * poor management and leadership * lack of disaster planning and preparedness	* social capital * coping mechanisms * adaptive strategies * memory of past disasters * good governance * ethical standards * local leadership * local NGO's * accountability * well-developed disaster plans and preparedness
Physical	* buildings at risk * unsafe infrastructure * unsafe critical facilities * rapid urbanisation	* physical capital * resilient buildings and infrastructure that copes with and resists extreme hazard forces
Economic	* mono-crop agriculture * non-diversified economy * subsistence economies * indebtedness * relief/welfare dependency	* economic capital * secure livelihoods * financial reserves * diversified agriculture and economy
Environmental	* deforestation * pollution of ground, water and air * the destruction of natural storm barriers, (such as mangroves) * global climate change	* natural environmental capital * the creation of natural barriers to storm action (such as coral reefs) * natural environmental recovery processes, (such as forests recovering from fires) * bio-diversity * responsible natural resource management.

Annex 4

Key Literature on VCA (with particular reference to Social VCA)

The following texts are considered to be of particular significance because they contain important and often critical-thinking on one or more of the following parameters:

- Focus on vulnerability / capacity assessment (VCA)
- Focus on community-based disaster management
- Discourse on the interaction between vulnerability, development and disasters
- Perspective upon the interface between external agencies and communities
- Perspective upon the characteristics of coastal storms and floods.

Allen K. 2003 *Changing Vulnerability to Flooding: Community-based disaster preparedness in the Philippines* PhD thesis for the Flood Hazard Research Centre, University of Middlesex

Anderson M. and Woodrow P. 1989 *Rising from the Ashes: Development Strategies in Times of Disaster* London: Intermediate Technology

Bankoff G. et al. (ed) 2003 *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development and People* London: Earthscan

Blaikie P., Cannon T., Davis I. and Wisner B. 1994 *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters* London: Routledge (also Wisner, 2004)

Cannon T., Twigg J., Rowall J. 2003 *Social Vulnerability, Sustainable Livelihoods and Disasters* Report to DFID, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance Department (CHAD) and Sustainable Livelihoods Office London: Department for International Development

Chambers R. 1997 *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the first last* London: Intermediate Technology Publications

Enders J. 2001 'Measuring community awareness and preparedness for emergencies' in *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management* Volume 16, Number 3, Spring 2001 Victoria: Emergency Management Australia (EMA)

Heijmans A. 2001 *Vulnerability a Matter of Perception* London: Disaster Management Working Paper for Benfield Hazard Research Centre, University College of London

Heijmans A. and Victoria L. 2001 *Citizenry-Based & Development-Oriented Disaster Response: Experiences and Practices in Disaster Management of the Citizens' Disaster Response Network in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Center for Disaster Preparedness

IFRC 1999 *Vulnerability and capacity assessment* Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

IFRC 2002 *World Disasters Report 2002: Focus on Reducing Risk* Geneva: International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Ingleton J. 1999 *Natural Disaster Management* Leicester: Tudor Rose (Bhatt M. pp94-95, Davis I. and Hall N. pp87-89, Maskrey A. pp84-86, Parker D. pp38-40)

Maskrey A. 1989 *Disaster Mitigation: A community based approach* Oxford: Oxfam

Palakudiyil T. and Todd M. 2003 *Facing up to the Storm, How local communities can cope with disaster: lessons from Orissa and Gujarat* London: Christian Aid

Parker D. 2000 *Floods: Volume 1 & 2* London and New York: Routledge (esp. Cannon T. *Vulnerability analysis and disasters)*

Parker D. and Budgen P. 1999 'The tropical cyclone warning dissemination system in Mauritius' in UK National Coordination Committee for the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction *Forecasts and Warnings* London: Thomas Telford

Shaw R. et al. 2003 ‘Community recovery and its sustainability: Lessons from Gujarat earthquake of India’ in *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management* Volume 18, Number 2, May 2003 Victoria: Emergency Management Australia (EMA)

Stephens C. Patnaik R. and Lewin S. 1995 ‘This is my Beautiful Home’: Risk Perceptions towards Flooding and Environment in Low-Income Urban Communities: A case Study in Indore, India. London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Trujillo M. 2000 *Risk-Mapping and Local Capacities: Lessons from Mexico and Central America* Oxford: Oxfam

Twigg J. 2004 ‘Disaster risk reduction, Mitigation and preparedness in development and emergency programming’ Good Practice Review, Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) London: Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

UNCRD 2003 *Sustainability in Grass Roots Initiatives: Focus on Community Based Disaster Management* Japan: UN Centre for Regional Development (UNCRD)

WHO 1999 *Community Emergency Preparedness: a manual for managers and policy-makers* Geneva: World Health Organisation

Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T. and Davis, I. 2004 *At Risk Second Edition: Natural hazards, people’s vulnerability and disasters* London: Routledge

World Meteorological Society 1999 *Comprehensive Risk Assessment for Natural Hazards* Geneva: World Meteorological Society (WMO)

(The authors are grateful to Paul Venton, for kindly agreeing to the reproduction of a bibliography he is assembling as part of his PhD research on VCA in Cranfield University. Certain additional texts have been added to update this list.)

Social Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis

Report on ProVention Consortium International Workshop

Geneva, 25-26 May 2004

Edited by Ian Davis
Visiting Professor, Cranfield University

July 2004

Executive Summary

The assessment and analysis of the vulnerabilities and capacities (VCA)[1] of a given community to threats of disasters can be instrumental in informing decisions on the planning and implementation of disaster risk reduction. An effective assessment will contribute to a greater understanding of the nature and level of risks that vulnerable people face; where these risks come from; who will be the worst affected; what means are available at all levels to reduce the risks and what initiatives can be undertaken to reduce the vulnerability and strengthen the capacities of people at risk. In addition, the analysis can have benefits beyond the disaster risk context, providing vital data to communities and governments towards social planning and resource allocation.

However, for assessments to lead to effective policies and concrete actions to reduce risks an understanding is needed of the constraints and opportunities of the VCA process. This was one of the main conclusions to emerge from an International Workshop, convened in May 2004 by the ProVention Consortium with representative participation by specialists drawn from practice and academia. Participants highlighted key elements of good practice in VCA but identified a wide range of technical, social, conceptual and developmental gaps that await closure.

The analysis of vulnerability and capacity requires both standard assessment checklist tools as well as a more open ended process that reviews the overall situation and risk context without preconceptions. An exploration of social capital and local coping strategies is a valuable part of the VCA process although it is surprising as to actually how little is known and documented about coping mechanisms and the insufficient attention given to strengthening existing social capital. The workshop explored the complex nature of coping and how certain survival strategies for marginalised groups can often be through dangerous and anti-social means. Participants were reminded of the danger of making assumptions prior to assessments with prescriptive interventions in mind.

[1] VCA is used throughout this report to refer to the process of social vulnerability and capacity analysis. The workshop acknowledged the limitations of the term VCA since a wide range of other terms are used by different organisations in referring to vulnerability assessment. However, for the purpose of the workshop and this report VCA is adopted as the common abbreviation.

Locating VCA within a livelihoods framework was seen to be an effective way to analyse the social aspects of risk and examine the root causes of vulnerability. Indeed, several participants stressed the importance of analysing vulnerability from a broader developmental perspective rather than solely a disaster planning viewpoint. It was acknowledged that root causes of vulnerability tend to be addressed through struggle and advocacy and, as such, one of the most valuable outcomes of the VCA process can be advocacy and awareness of the causal factors of vulnerability.

Participants agreed that risk assessment should be a holistic process and aspects of social vulnerability and capacity should be integrated with assessment of other sectors, such as the physical and environmental. In this regard, while VCA is essentially concerned with the social dimensions of human vulnerability it is important not to divorce the process from other risk assessments. VCA begins at the community level, with a recognition of the complexity of a hierarchical order and flow of information, patterns of administration, control of resources and at the bedrock, politics and power.

Discussions concerning "good practice" in VCA resulted in a host of insights and practical suggestions. These included improving the participatory process with the groups being assessed, integrating VCA with sustainable livelihood analysis, expanding VCA to assess root causes of vulnerability and the creation of holistic risk assessments. Various gaps were identified, including weaknesses in current VCA tools and approaches, the elusive governmental presence in the assessment process, challenges in dealing with communities and the poor links between assessment and disaster reduction action.

A series of practical "next steps" to improve and expand VCA were recommended. Proposals included improving terminology, devising ways to convert theory in practice, expanding VCA to cope with the challenge of expanding global vulnerability, expanding information sources, promoting wider and deeper learning, extending the range of stakeholders in future discussions and suggestions for projects to inform and shape future directions.

The report concluded with four overarching observations. Firstly, concern was expressed over the implications of the neglected government dimension, reflected by the absence of government representatives in the workshop and the limited role often given to governments stakeholders in VCAs conducted by NGOs. A second conclusion related to possible idealisation of VCA, with both tool and process often being regarded in a rather uncritical light as the most effective means of assessing community risk. Linked to this, the very concept of "community" often assumed in VCA practice can ignore the reality to be found in many situations where viable communities do not exist or at least the given community is far from homogenous. The positive value of VCA as a powerful tool to promote long-term development is emphasised and finally there is a plea to close some key technical and conceptual gaps by developing the knowledge base to enable VCA to expand and become an even sharper tool than at present.

The participants were convinced that if disaster risk reduction is to expand in response to the challenge of an increasingly vulnerable and unsafe world then it is essential to develop an effective approach, involving tools as well as processes to understand and measure both the vulnerabilities of communities or groups as well as their capacities. This requires greater attention and action at the grass roots level of those who are "at-risk". Unlike many hazards that can be international in their scale of impact, the manifestation of vulnerability is always a "local" experience where one family may radically differ from their neighbours in their respective exposure to disaster threats. In this respect, VCA can be a useful and effective tool and process at the local level.

Introduction

This report provides a summary of the key issues raised and conclusions of the international workshop on 'Social Vulnerability and Capacity Analysis' (VCA), held in Geneva at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies on May 25-26, 2004. The workshop was organised by the ProVention Consortium as part of ProVention's efforts to improve the process of disaster risk assessment and analysis.

The workshop brought together leading academics and practitioners from different organisations with knowledge and experience in the practice of VCA. Some 26 leading academics and practitioners from different organisations and countries, with representation from Central and Latin America, Southern Africa, South and South-east Asia, contributed to the initiative through presentation of case studies, research and workshop discussion groups.

Structure of the report

The opening section of the report gives a brief explanation of the context and purpose of the workshop. The following sections summarise the key issues, questions and conclusions emerging from the workshop sessions, with particular emphasis being given to the results of the group discussions. These main sections of the report are structured simply around four key topics:

- Identifying good practice in VCA
- Defining gaps in VCA
- Ways to improve VCA
- Recommendations for the future.

The final section of the report presents the salient conclusions of the workshop. Two annexes are included, summarising the discussions held at the working groups, are included: Annex 1: *"Assessing Social Capital and Coping Strategies"* and Annex 2 *"Check lists and Situational Analysis".*

Given the wide range of issues covered during the course of the workshop and wealth of experiences contributed by the participants the report is inevitably limited to a summary of the key points and main conclusions. A selection of quotes from participants is included throughout the report, but none are individually credited.

Context of the workshop

In recent years, there has been an apparent concentration of efforts by both academics and practitioners to understand the complex nature of social vulnerability and capacity. In certain respects, this has been in response to the perceived imbalance of focus of attention on physical vulnerabilities and past neglect of the analysis of social, economic and political factors that so often drive vulnerability. The increased attention to the social dimensions of risk assessment is contributing to a better identification of specific vulnerable groups or individuals as well as an improved analysis of the socio-economic conditions that create and maintain vulnerability.

A broad consensus has also emerged within the disaster and development communities that it is essential to consider an assessment of vulnerability in parallel to a measurement of capacity in all sectors. The use of the concept of capacity emerged in response to the negativity of the term vulnerability: to speak of people as being vulnerable was to treat them as passive victims and ignore the many capacities, resources and assets people possess to resist, cope with and recover from disaster shocks they experience. A key element, therefore, of the VCA approach is the dual concern for analysing both vulnerability and capacity.

A diverse range of vulnerability and capacity assessment tools and approaches have been developed and field tested, mainly by NGOs and community-based organisations, with a particular emphasis on participatory and people oriented approaches. Indeed, the influence of social development methodologies, such as participatory rural assessment techniques, is very much evident in VCA. Assessments have mainly focused on the context of so-called "natural" disaster risk, but have also been extended to the assessment of conflict and health related threats.

However, despite the growing recognition of the potential benefits of VCA and emerging tools, the dimension of social vulnerabilities and capacities is seldom factored into the main risk assessment

process. One reason is the lack of knowledge and critical analysis of the different methodologies and approaches, in particular their relative accuracy, effectiveness and relevance. There is, therefore, an urgent need for comparative analysis, interdisciplinary research and, above all, the sharing of knowledge, learning and experience between the community of actors involved in VCA.

Thus, the purpose of the workshop was to provide an opportunity to enhance learning on different VCA approaches, highlight elements of good practice, analyse tools and data, identify gaps in methodologies and examine ways to integrate VCA into the wider risk assessment process and define future directions.

The subject of VCA is of particular interest to the work of the ProVention Consortium and its efforts to improve the accuracy and quality of the risk assessment process, in particular the critical role of community risk assessment. ProVention is, therefore, currently collaborating with a number of Consortium partners, in particular the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and Organisation of American States (OAS), on an initiative to develop practices in VCA in order to strengthen community based disaster risk reduction. The workshop was seen by ProVention as an important part of this wider effort to improve learning and practice in the assessment and analysis of vulnerability and capacity.

Identifying good practice in VCA

"How can we best use VCA, since it is a powerful tool with the potential to transform both the community being assessed as well as the organisation conducting the assessment?"

Workshop Participant

This section summarises the main elements of good practice in VCA identified by workshop participants in response to the case study presentations and group discussions.

Improving the participatory process with groups being assessed

Share ownership. The ownership, empowerment and decision making of the entire VCA process from, and for the community is needed through a process of genuine, rather than token participation. A participant proposed that *"……participants be held responsible <u>for</u> and <u>what</u> is to be done about their vulnerability".* This approach is essential since the VCA approach can become dominated by powerful players. The aim must be to ensure that the least powerful, and probably most vulnerable, drive the process.

VCA for whom? Recognition is needed of the different motivations to undertake assessments and to challenge those that derive from the assessor's, or key informant's self-interest rather than from the needs of the overall community.

Preconceptions. Emphasis was continually given to the dangers of preconceptions by assessors concerning *whose* vulnerability… *what* causal factors…. and *what* capacities?

Attitudes. Recognition is necessary of the importance of constructive and sensitive attitudes on the part of the assessor. This will require assessors not to teach, tell or to be judgemental in their approach.

Raising expectations. Many communities have expectations beyond those of NGOs or other agencies involved in VCA programmes. Therefore facilitators from outside the community should be careful not to make promises about projects / assistance that they cannot keep. To avoid such risks facilitators need to be well-trained and highly sensitive to the fact that expectations do not necessarily get matched by resources. Thus it is essential to clarify the objectives and limitations of the VCA with the community prior to the assessment taking place. However, the raising of community expectations through VCA can be a positive process that confronts defeatist attitudes, and enables people and their leaders to recognise their strengths as well as their weaknesses.

Expand the number of stakeholders. The workshop was reminded of the need to look well beyond the views of community leaders when conducting VCA "*Involve stakeholders, meaning those*

vulnerable and those who will benefit by addressing the vulnerability. And to participate in the VCA process, government, rich and poor, all need to be involved"

Return data to the community. The results from VCA need to be returned to the community that has been assessed. This baseline data can be subsequently used to monitor and evaluate increased performance if risk reduction measures have been introduced.

Developing stronger links between VCA and sustainable livelihood analysis

The framework of the five 'capitals'- The use of the five categories of capital (*human, social, physical, financial, natural)* within a sustainable livelihoods framework is an effective multidisciplinary strategy to understand the full range of capacities and resources. The five forms of capital adopted in promoting sustainable livelihoods can help provide facilitators with a framework that also reduces the likelihood of projecting their own personal inclinations as being those of the group being assessed, resulting in biased analysis.

Expanding VCA to assess root causes of vulnerability

Participants were convinced that VCA can and must be expanded to assess the causal factors that lead directly towards unsafe conditions. They recognised that an approach that confines attention to the assessment of symptoms while ignoring causes will result in the symptoms continually reappearing. The following points need to be considered:

- Root Causes may not easily emerge as institutions, as well as people, tend to think within the limits of what they believe they can achieve, or of what exists within the existing policy frame.
- Understanding of underlying causes will need input from different levels and requires a multisectoral approach.
- Causes will usually need to be addressed through struggle and advocacy. Advocacy routes need to be creative and use capacities at different levels. Some routes may involve risks that need to be anticipated and discussed by groups contemplating such approaches.
- VCA should deepen understanding of how groups and the range of stakeholders interact 'inside' and 'outside'. This will require a stakeholder and power analysis.
- The capacity of communities to understand causes of vulnerability should not be underestimated. VCA can provide a forum to raise and discuss these issues.
- It is also vital to understand the causes of the range of capacities, as well as vulnerabilities and so recognise that they are constantly changing, some expanding others disappearing.

Creating Holistic Risk Assessment

Link pre and post disaster assessments. It is essential to link *predictive* VCA with post-disaster assessments of social needs and damage to establish the effectiveness of VCA and to incorporate the measurement of *actual* vulnerability as opposed to anticipated vulnerability into a comprehensive risk assessment system.

Need for a Holistic Risk Assessment (including social, physical economical and environmental approaches). Social VCA is only one element in the overall process of vulnerability assessment that needs to include a wider range of concerns such as physical, economical and environmental approaches. All need to be integrated into a comprehensive and interdisciplinary review of vulnerability and capacity. New tools are needed for a holistic approach. Yet there are different points of emphasis concerning the best way to achieve integration. Since vulnerability is multi-sectoral, it has to be addressed through *parallel analysis* of both vulnerability and capacity taking place in ***all*** sectors of society and the environment.

Defining gaps in VCA

Weaknesses in current VCA tools and processes

"Despite all the valuable efforts being made at grass-roots level with VCA type activities, it was not always clear what the information was being collected for, and how it was related to opportunities to reduce vulnerability or boost capacity."

Workshop Participant

Reliable indicators of VCA effectiveness are missing. If indicators or targets are developed to measure the effectiveness of tools they are best used for self appraisal, to enable a given assessor or agency to measure their own progress.

Scaling-up proves problematic. Organisations face a problem in "scaling up" from the micro to macro levels. This raises a critical question on the impact, influence and replicability of a local VCA on other levels. To what extent is local information gathered from a VCA transferable or expandable to similar or different contexts?

De-professionalisation of VCA is needed. There are three reasons why VCA needs to be de-professionalised:

- first, to enable grass-roots level workers to be able to use these tools or processes,
- second, because locally based assessors can locate information denied to professionally qualified assessors, and
- third, to greatly increase the volume of VCA being undertaken to match the massive needs for risk reduction programmes in response to the expansion of global vulnerability.

Training of local staff in VCA is lacking. If VCA is de-professionalised then it follows that there is a training requirement to equip local staff to undertake the process. In many situations, opportunities to undertake this training do not exist. There is a further gap in the provision of joint training for the many different levels of governments.

The key role of women in VCA is insufficiently acknowledged. The crucial role of women, both as highly effective assessors as well as being key informants, is barely recognised at present.

Check Lists or Blank Sheets? The role of the check list is to make certain that a comprehensive set of issues are raised in a logical sequence, while its danger is that it can influence (or even pre-determine) the outcome and thus miss vital information. In contrast, the role of the "blank sheet approach" is to make certain that communities identify *their* own risks, and rank them in *their* own priority order of importance. This more open ended approach is vital since any assessor can not assume that the threats are known. The consensus of opinion was that it is unhelpful and unnecessary to polarise *generalised* check lists against an open-ended *specific* situation assessment without any frame of reference. Both approaches are complementary, and will probably be needed in most situations.

Financial resources to undertake VCA are limited. In an increasingly harsh financial environment financial resources to undertake VCA are not easily available from donors. Therefore, it was suggested that donors needed to be educated, and/or other resource mobilisation sources approached such as the international development banks, the private sector, etc.?

Elusive Governments

A key gap, evident in the selection of participants for this workshop, is the lack of government involvement in VCA and examples of governments which undertake VCA as part of their government's risk reduction policy. Solutions proposed to close this gap included the need to build bridges, to keep lines open and to look for openings or niches. The issue of vulnerability needed to be brought into the open through a transparent dialogue with governments.

A workshop participant suggested that within democracies, it is logical that governments should coordinate the VCA process. It was reported that *"Experience in the Americas has shown that local authorities can be sensitised to projects on risk reduction. More generally involvement of government as a key stakeholder enables them to see the 'transformative benefits' of VCA".*

Challenges in dealing with communities

Who speaks for the community? There is a need to be clear about the 'voice' of a community, since as one participant reminded the workshop: "*undoubtedly the community is the process."* The fundamental question starts at the level of the individual assessor interviewing community representatives. Here there is the need to recognise that where a community does exist, whose agenda do *"they"* represent? Do those assessed merely speak for themselves or can their views be regarded as genuinely representative in defining precisely who is vulnerable and what are the locally available capacities?

No community to assess. What is the specific purpose in undertaking a VCA where there is no effective community to provide information or to take further protective action? This problem arises in situations such as rapidly urbanising unplanned settlements. Here new approaches will need to be developed for contexts with marginal and transient populations. Thus variants of VCA are needed for both stable communities and unstable groups that lack community functions and leadership.

Community prejudice. Another challenge relates to communities that reject certain groups when undertaking a VCA. Participants gave examples of many vulnerable groups excluded by the "community", such as widows, the handicapped, lower castes, ethnic minority groups, groups that support political opposition parties etc.

Areas subject to political violence. Undertaking VCA in conditions where there are threats of violence and conflict that can totally disrupt any form of VCA or disaster planning has also proven particularly problematic.[2]

Poor links between VCA and risk reduction

Community Action Plans as a result of the VCA process. It has to be remembered that VCA always needs to lead towards community action plans to reduce vulnerabilities and strengthen capacities. Thus VCA should not develop a separate identity distinct from the overall planning process. One participant raised the issue: *"There is little clear and specific guidance on how to assess, analyse, and reduce vulnerability through action planning".*

Rationale for VCA should be to reduce risks. A gap in current practice is to insist on undertaking VCA prior to identifying projects and interventions. More specifically a key gap relates to vagueness in identifying specific reasons for collecting items of information to reduce risks. One participant raised an ethical issue by questioning the rationale for conducting an assessment exercise if there was no parallel commitment for action to reduce risks: *"Should you identify who is vulnerable and why, if you are not going to do something about it?"*

Suggested further ways to improve VCA

A rich variety of general and specific proposals emerged during the workshop. The above sections of this report on Good Practice and Gaps already contain a wealth of suggestions for ways to develop VCA and it is unnecessary to repeat all of them here.

[2] One participant cited the grim example of Oxfam's work in strengthening community leadership in Guatemala in the 1970's and 80's following the 1976 earthquake to be followed by a concerted programme by a repressive government to kill or drive off all these trained leaders, who they perceived to be a threat to the government.

Find alternative words to “vulnerability”

There was a general agreement that while the word vulnerability is the key expression that is needed, nevertheless it is currently severely overused and it often carries a galaxy of different meanings. During the workshop participants used many descriptive words under the broad umbrella of “vulnerability”. They included: problems, defencelessness, exposure, openness, liability, weakness, limitations, powerlessness, deficiencies, susceptibility, etc.

A number of suggestions were made to develop a more accurate terminology. These included the need to look for specific rather than general terms, carefully avoiding words not in common usage. It was also proposed that terminology must start from, or be dictated by those who are “at risk”, rather than by academics or decision makers. However, no mechanism for this “bottom-up” approach to definition and description was put forward.

Convert theory into practice

A repeated comment during the workshop was that VCA had become far too theoretical. In the coming years of development of VCA the process needs to be better informed by lessons from practice rather than from taking a lead from academic theory, and should start from the grass roots level beginning with communities, local authorities and NGOs. This can be undertaken by involving stakeholders from government and officials working above the local level. However, there was unanimity that the theoretical base must continue to be developed though applied research, and that this process is vital in seeking answers to many of the questions raised where knowledge is still at an anecdotal level.

Expand the scale and scope of VCA

Parallel processes are needed:

- VCA at the community level (as an element in Community-Based Disaster Preparedness) which enables grass-roots identification of perceived risks and permits the ‘transformative’ aspect of community investigations to alter relations between people and organisations.
- A form of VCA is needed for use in situations where functioning stable communities do not exist.
- Regional hazard risk analysis is required, to deal with earthquake, flood, hurricane, drought and other hazards at the higher scale, which local communities cannot tackle. One participant noted the good reasons to use VCA-type activities in this process: *“…. so that policies designed to deal with the hazard are grounded in local and grass-roots actions for preparedness. In other words, VCA or Community Based Disaster preparedness (CBDP) is still relevant to ensure that regional hazard policies can work properly. Regional hazard analysis is a form of social protection where organisations that are capable of having a broader and technically-informed view are able (and have a duty) to support the protection of people”.*

Proposed next steps by workshop participants

Expand information sources

- Facilitate a web-based inventory of VCA tools & teaching methods.
- Provide resources for local facilitators.
- Document good practice case studies using a livelihood approach.

Enable learning to occur at all levels

- Consider Post-VCA evaluations – what happens after them? Does VCA actually build local capacity / reduce vulnerability?
- Track the impact of VCA.

Stakeholder involvement

- Convene an interagency forum at the national level.
- Encourage development practitioners to become involved in VCA.
- In a future forum include the most vulnerable and community members, to hear their voice.

Projects

- Identify a proper framework for the different assessment tools.
- Understanding how the tools are applicable at community level.
- Develop VCA as a scenario tool.
- Conduct research into root causes and test the findings in a development programme approach.
- Create joint experience through a pilot project linked to a programme of social development.
- Develop guidelines on VCA and its links with the social development process.

Conclusion

Given the wide range of issues covered in the intensive two days of discussions to pull the threads together to suggest any coherent conclusions has proved particularly challenging. However, in reflecting on the lessons learned from the workshop, four important issues emerge.

Elusive Governments

At the workshop there was one participant present who used to be a government official assessing social risks in Australia, but no other government official participated, (especially from hazard prone developing countries). The role and responsibility of governments was never central in workshop discussions. This omission of governmental presence or input is of course not unusual in the development sphere. Often NGO and Government policies and programmes run on parallel yet unconnected lines. This may be due to a host of factors such as some mistrust of NGOs by certain governments who may regard them as a *"hazard"* or vice-versa when NGOs fail to engage with Governments in promoting VCA or other actions. Also it is often the case that many innovative approaches have started from the non-governmental sector before becoming absorbed into governmental public policy and practice, and VCA may be following this time honoured route.

> *"This workshop takes place in a context where governments are shirking their responsibilities, saying that they can not do anything about risk reduction. Their emphasis seems to be on 'community empowerment' rather than on "vulnerability and capacity assessment' ".*
>
> Workshop Participant

But without governments adopting a working practice of risk assessments, including VCA, there is a risk of the process remaining a useful, exciting but essentially marginal pursuit. And there is also the risk of ill-conceived governmental risk reduction measures that are not based on a thorough assessment of specific vulnerabilities and resources. Therefore, the formidable challenge of expanding the VCA approach to government action needs to be placed at the top of any listing of essential next steps.

Idealisation of VCA tools and the 'community'

The evident enthusiasm that has greeted the arrival of VCA as a methodology for community driven risk assessment is of course something to celebrate. It was clear that many groups had embraced this tool and found it extremely beneficial both in relation to the groups they were working with as well as for their own development.

However, for all its virtues VCA is not a folk movement nor is it a safety measure that actually reduces risks. We need to remember that it is just a tool to assess a situation and like all tools, VCA has its inherent limitations, as was perceptively noted by a participant: *"There seemed to be a distinct danger that VCA was being idealised. There was little analysis of its limitations. For instance, community-based VCA activities would not have helped with disasters like Bam (Iran), probably not even the Bhuj (Gujarat) earthquake, and in many other cases where:*

a) *the hazard impact is at a spatial scale that exceeds individual communities,*
b) *people consider that they have other more daily risks and problems that emerge in VCA and do not mention significant hazards."*

In a similar manner, the concept "community" appeared to be accepted in an uncritical manner. As noted in the report, VCA is also needed in areas where there is no concept of community or where communities do not exist in any viable form. Participants raised many probing and uncomfortable questions concerning the community focus, particularly over the role of a community where they may be the principal architect of their own vulnerability.

Therefore another productive "next step" could be to explore the entire notion of VCA in relation to communities or their absence. The study would assess capacity and vulnerability where communities do not exist, and there is no collective body to implement risk reduction measures.

VCA as a potent development tool

After the workshop a participant spoke of her surprise that the developmental aspects of VCA were being discussed and debated yet again at this late stage in the application of VCA. "*Why is this issue only being recognised or discussed now, when this awareness has been evident for well over a decade?"*

As the disaster response field continues to expand, (often at the expense of development work and risk reduction funding), it becomes clear that any proven tool or approach (such as VCA) that promotes a more developmental approach for disaster officials to use and learn from must be welcomed with open arms. But how can VCA escape from the introverted disaster community into the broader mainstream of development?*"*

Workshop participants were unanimous in their recognition that VCA has extensive potential to initiate genuine change. This long-term perspective is particularly important as VCA moves steadily into the assessment of causal factors. Facilitator at grass-roots levels need to be able to support community actions to reduce vulnerability and find ways to sensitively reduce root causes through advocacy and by drawing on the contributions of others. There is a vital time dimension to consider since any action to address a "root cause" may take years to lead down the road towards unsafe conditions. One participant with extensive experience of VCA commented that it takes about ten years for the process to develop and translate into "*something real*."

Gaining knowledge

The achievements of certain agencies as well as key individuals, (many present in this gathering) that have advanced this subject in recent years are recognised. The workshop would have been radically different and less comprehensive even two years ago. But as knowledge expands, we become increasingly aware of our sparse understanding, limited experience and lack of probing analysis. These gaps need to be urgently closed before VCA can become the sharper tool or process that is so badly needed.

As a closing post-script, I am sure that readers of this report, who attended this productive meeting and are still digesting its impact, will wish to warmly endorse the view of one of the participants: *"The workshop was a rich and rewarding experience, and reinforced the value that people place in VCA approaches, and the significance of livelihoods as the basis for understanding a key focal point of vulnerability and capacity."*

Annex 1

Assessing Social Capital and Coping Strategies

Working group participants reflected on the crucial role of social capital and coping strategies as key factors in determining a community's resilience to natural hazards. The following five aspects were discussed:

Learning

Organisations conducting VCA learn about themselves. For example, through the process Red Cross / Red Crescent teams were able to reflect on their role and position and VCA helped the organisation to move from a charity / relief orientation towards a more developmental mode of working.

Furthermore, local organisations can use VCA as a means of discovering and exchanging information. VCA can also contribute to building up social capital through the development of new relationships. An example of this process would be to work with recent migrants to urban areas that may not have built social capital networks and so would find it difficult to gain access to information on risk, vulnerabilities and innovation to adaptive change (coping). VCA has also worked effectively across ethnic or occupational groups. In one setting the process allowed a farmer to share knowledge on agricultural practices with other farmers. This approach increased the value of the farmer's coping as well as extending coping amongst a larger group of farmers.

Context

There is a clear need to make sure that VCA does not impose an assumption of the hazard and its potential impact. It also needs to see the way a hazard is *"felt".* So that, for example, climate change causing drought conditions might be *"felt"* locally as market fluctuations in basic commodities. In such situations the market may be addressed locally, while affecting climate change would be totally out of reach of such communities.

It is also vital to recognise the differences and inter-linkages between individual and collective (or social) capacities. Individual capacities may undermine collective capacities and vice versa. Here institutional analysis is the key – what are the cultural, values, laws and relationships that link individuals into collective – where does power lie to change patterns of relationships and the influence they exert over individuals and groups? Mobility analysis is a tool used by UNDP to map physical and social connections. The connection to livelihood analysis is critical in this respect.

Attitudes

The attitudes of those conducting VCA are very important. Assessors need to be clear on what the local communities can expect the VCA to deliver. In some cases there will be few clear outputs as VCA will only contribute to a process of empowerment of the communities concerned.

The aim should be to learn from local experiences – not to teach or tell participants, or be judgemental. It might be useful to separate risk and vulnerability analysis from capacity work. The latter can benefit from ***not*** being constrained by a negative / reactive mindset that comes from vulnerability. Experience from Madagascar supported this view.

Tracing Change

There is a need to acknowledge that coping and change provoked by VCA can have unexpected and sometimes negative outputs. In some cases individual adaptations may make other community members worse off. Change can also create new risks, for example, deforestation. Involvement in the sex industry or migration can increase access to money but also bring HIV/AIDS home. Tools that can access secondary data, for example from hospitals, are needed to triangulate the accuracy of information and form the basis of a review of the impact of changes.

Reflection / Analytical Capacity

VCA can be used as a process to bring expert and lay – or outsider and insider – knowledge together. At least it can act as a space for participants to reflect on their actions, capacities and coping. It can also reflect on the role of other actors and over the long term.

There is a need to know what is the target for change – what is the core unit / element for protection, for example preserving agricultural livelihoods where environmental sustainability or market access does not exist could simply prolong hunger and risk (whilst preserving livelihoods). An alternative focus on human welfare might surface through the process.

Annex 2

Checklists and Situational Analysis

Before developing any further tools there is a need for an agreed methodology for VCA. However there are associated risks in this quest. One participant warned of the danger of being locked into particular methodologies for VCA that may inhibit future evolution. VCA is a process that can, (and should) employ a ***range*** of tools. The choice of assessment tool would depend on time constraints, especially when undertaking post-impact assessments. There is a need to develop criteria to frame the analysis (such as gender and population density), and these considerations may be more useful than checklists in gathering vital information. Thus the development of *assessment criteria* may be more significant than the application of *checklists.* It is also clear that up to the present time VCA has been an all-purpose generalised tool, applied to all types of hazard. There is now a need to develop specific tools to address varied hazard conditions.

The skill of assessors is in their ability to combine local knowledge and experience with scientific qualitative and technical knowledge. In addition skilled assessors will use tools with sensitivity, continually checking that they are not making unwarranted assumptions in using any tool or process to gather information. The consensus of opinion was that it is unhelpful and unnecessary to polarise *generalised* check lists against an open-ended *specific* situation assessment without any frame of reference. The two approaches are not in opposition but can be effectively used together, perhaps in all situations.

Checklists

The role of the check list is to make certain that a comprehensive set of issues are raised in a logical sequence, while the danger of the check list is that it can influence (or even pre-determine) the outcome and thus miss vital information. One participant advised not to: *"… presume who or what is vulnerable. One can find data to support any theory – don't fall into this trap… Combine local knowledge with scientific and technical, information, especially on hazards which may be unknown to the community".*

- The basis of any checklist should be knowledge gained from previous research, rather than a series of assumptions.
- Checklist tools are particularly appropriate tools where there are no sensitive background issues.
- Different types of checklists are needed for different tasks, and therefore there should not be any naïve attempt to produce a standard assessment checklist tool for universal application.
- Checklists are particularly appropriate for the analysis of disaster response and they are necessary during post- impact assessment.

Situation Analysis

The role of the "blank sheet" is to make certain that communities identify *their* own risks, and rank them in *their* own priority order of importance. This more open ended approach is vital since any assessor cannot assume that the threats are known. There was agreement that: *"An attitude is needed to listen to the voices of a community, what is said and particularly to determine what some sectors of community cannot say".*

- Situation Analysis is resource and time intensive, requiring skilled assessors taking considerable time to accomplish.
- Situation Analysis is an effective participatory tool, but it may raise priority concerns of the community that may fall outside the scope of the assisting organisation.
- There are vital baseline requirements that are needed in undertaking situational analysis.

Summary

VCA requires both standard assessment checklist tools as well as a more open ended process that reviews the overall situation and risk context without preconceptions.

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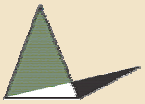

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The ProVention Consortium is a global coalition of international organisations, governments, academic institutions, the private sector and civil society organisations dedicated to reducing the risk and social, economic and environmental impacts of natural hazards on vulnerable populations in developing countries.

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