

Zeitschrift: Geographica Helvetica : schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geographie = Swiss journal of geography = revue suisse de géographie = rivista svizzera di geografia

Herausgeber: Verband Geographie Schweiz ; Geographisch-Ethnographische Gesellschaft Zürich

Band: 57 (2002)

Heft: 1: Vulnerability = Verwundbarkeit = Vulnérabilité

Vorwort: Vulnerability : editorial to the special issue

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Vulnerability

Editorial to the Special Issue

Hans-Georg Bohle, Heidelberg

The discourse on vulnerability is rapidly gaining currency. For more than a decade now, vulnerability has been a recognised conceptual framework and analytical approach in research and applications regarding uncertainty and risk, especially in terms of livelihood security (CHAMBERS 1989). Vulnerability as a social science concept has found wide application in research on natural hazards (BLAIKIE et al. 1994), particularly in situations of famine and food insecurity (e.g. WATTS & BOHLE 1993, BOHLE 1994), risky environments (KASPERSON et al. 1995) and endangered ecosystems (LOHNERT & GEIST 1999). Recently, researchers have sought to link vulnerability and extreme events to the longer-term understanding of sustainable development and human security, especially in the context of global environmental change (DOWNING, BOHLE & WATTS 1994, DOWNING 1996), globalization (BECK 1997) and the new threats of global terrorism (BAUDRILLARD 2002).

The vulnerability approach has also been gradually acknowledged and used by development institutions and international research programmes. As early as 1994, the International Federation of the Red Cross organised a full-fledged session on «Vulnerability» during the Yokohama World Conference of the «International Decade on Natural Disaster Reduction». Development agencies such as the World Food Programme of the United Nations, Save the Children Fund and the USAID-funded «Famine Early Warning System» for Africa have endeavoured to develop methodologies to assess, measure, visualise and map the social and geographical dimensions of vulnerability, with the objective of monitoring vulnerability situations effectively, of taking early action and of precisely targeting the most vulnerable regions and sections of disaster-prone societies (BOHLE 1992). In the research community concerned with environmental change, a new programme on «Global Environmental Change and Food Systems» has recently been established, again with a focus on vulnerability. One of the most prominent current efforts to apply the vulnerability concept is now being undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme in the form of a new «World Vulnerability Report», an annual exercise which will evaluate the exposure of the world's countries to natural disasters and the success with which they respond to, and cope with, these risks (ZENEB 2002).

The collection of papers on Vulnerability in this special issue of *GEOGRAPHICA HELVETICA* reflects some of the major recent trends in the application of vulnerability as a social science concept. MICHAEL WATTS, in his essay on risks, security and globalization, sets the scene for a wide-ranging, provocative discussion of vulnerabilities, all having their source in violent political and economic systems. His focus is on the political economy of famines, both historical and current, which are interpreted as «holocausts» (DAVIS 2001) or «genocides», and which are linked to the recent threats posed by terrorism. WATTS argues that any discussion of how to improve security must start from the grinding gears of global vulnerability such as capitalist modernity, the world market, Islam, US hegemony, and the crisis of the secular nationalist project.

MARKUS MAYER goes deeper into the issue of conflict, violence and vulnerability, by analysing the role of youth unrest and unemployment in creating frustration, opposition and resistance in a peripheral region of Sri Lanka. MAYER observes that the growing preparedness of youths in Sri Lanka to resort to violence stems from their exposure to crises, restructuring, and new social orders, on the one hand, and disturbed identities, lack of social integration and missing political participation on the other. His empirical findings confirm WATTS' claim that existential crises and vulnerabilities are somehow Janus-faced. Under some circumstances they create revolutionary movements; in others they can act as a sort of dead weight, driving vulnerable groups into apathetic submission. Simultaneously, MAYER's article substantially supports WATTS' assertion that the huge increase in unemployment among graduates provides fertile ground for radical and militant anti-urban and anti-capitalist ideas and actions.

SABINE TRÖGER, in her paper on the moral economy of food distribution in a famine-prone region of Tanzania, points to the fact that informal security systems such as reciprocity and social control for food distribution are rapidly weakening under the impact of political and economic transformations and profound social change, thus exposing more and more vulnerable people to hunger and starvation. Her village studies show that this process is increasingly gaining pace even in peripheral, remote villages. By utilising an actor-oriented approach and by linking this approach to the concept of «structuration» (GIDDENS 1997), TRÖGER is able to illuminate how the «architecture» of the

food security system becomes increasingly fragile. Her empirical findings in Tanzania support WATTS' argument that rules and norms of sociability are rapidly breaking down, most particularly socially determined entitlements such as indigenous security institutions, giving way to new dimensions and intensities of vulnerability.

HANNAH BÜTTNER, in her case study on water crisis and water harvesting in West Bengal/India, employs a whole range of social science approaches to pinpoint the crucial role that institutional arrangements play in water management at the village-level. BÜTTNER links the concept of «sustainable livelihood security» to SEN's entitlement approach by examining household-level endowments, entitlements and capabilities as determinants of livelihood security or vulnerability. Her analysis supports WATTS' claim that only a complex and dynamic approach to «entitlement mapping» that involves all manner of social, cultural, political, institutional, and collective actions and that is sensitive to the multiplicity and creativity of coping and adaptation strategies can disentangle the complex internal structure of vulnerability and livelihood security.

SUSANNE VAN DILLEN's paper employs diverse quantitative and qualitative measures of vulnerability to construct a composite index of vulnerability. Like TRÖGER and MAYER, she systematically links external, structural and internal, actor-oriented perspectives of vulnerability to explore the multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of vulnerability. Drawing on an in-depth study of a South Indian village, VAN DILLEN is able to show that neither household activity portfolios, nor their mobility patterns, nor their current incomes can really indicate their risk exposure or coping capabilities. In conclusion, VAN DILLEN emphasizes that the problem of scale, both temporal and spatial, cannot easily be solved when assessing vulnerability.

Although they differ widely in style, scope, scale and focus, all the papers in this special issue share some common ground in vulnerability analysis. All authors agree, in principle, that vulnerability as a social concept addresses social rather than spatial dimensions, and that the scale of analysis (from the global to the local) widely determines the factors that have to be employed in exploring the sources of people's vulnerabilities. There is also a clear indication that vulnerability, unlike poverty, is a highly dynamic concept, with a time dimension built into it, addressing short and long-term trajectories of vulnerability and livelihood security. Moreover, the multi-actor perspective of vulnerability evolves as a common denominator, especially when employing institutional approaches or actor-oriented perspectives. Last but not least, all papers share

the concern that the erosion of life chances, increased risk exposure, and disempowerment, with the resulting vulnerabilities, are an extremely fertile ground for conflict and violence, and that factors such as globalization, the unpredictability of the world market, the crisis of the nation state and of governance and the vagaries of global environmental change pose new threats and risks to the most vulnerable populations, especially in risky environments.

To conclude with LOCK (2001: 289), we must admit that the current forms of globalization and «market triumphalism» (PEET & WATTS 1993) bypass the interests of the majority of the global populations. This is indicated by the rapidly growing polarisation between poor and rich, the structural inability to overcome hunger, the erosion of governance, and the dramatic tendency to use violence as a means to attain economic and political objectives. These developments are escalating in the rapidly increasing scale of youth unemployment all over the world, which will further lead to frustrated expectations and violence. In such a situation, the focus must be put on the most vulnerable, who find themselves on the dark side of globalization. Priority has to be given to improving the life chances and ensuring the survival of the most vulnerable populations, as opposed to economic «orders» alone.

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