

Understanding vulnerability and capacity



Why use this activity?

This tool helps a group to understand what is meant by **vulnerability** to disasters and the **capacity** to anticipate, prepare for, cope with and recover from a disaster.



A brief description

A facilitator uses discussion questions to help a group understand the concepts of vulnerability to disaster and capacity to deal with a disaster.



You will need

- Paper and pens



Timeline

This activity will take between 30 mins and one hour.



What to do

Part 1: Vulnerabilities

Explain that a **hazard** is an extreme event which could injure people or damage property and the environment. Ask the group to suggest different hazards that affect communities around the world. Write these down on a big piece of paper.

Facilitate a discussion using the following questions:

- Think about a huge hurricane that affects multiple countries. Are all countries affected in the same way by the hurricane? Why do some countries face bigger problems?
- Think about a flood that impacts a region of a country. Are all households affected in the same way by the flood? Why do some households face bigger problems?
- Think about a village facing a severe drought, and a typical household within the village. Is everybody within the household affected in the same way by the drought? Why do some people face bigger problems?

Explain that **vulnerability** is about how likely people are to suffer serious loss, damage, injury or death as a result of a hazard. Explain that a **disaster** occurs when a hazard affects **vulnerable** people who are **unable to cope** with its effects. Damage is done to various aspects of life, livelihoods, property and the environment.

To understand vulnerability we need to ask **why** it would be possible for a hazard (the wind, earth tremor, flood water etc) to cause so much damage. Vulnerability might be difficult to see, because it is often linked to something which is absent or not accessible to some members of the community.

Notes for a facilitator: variations in vulnerability

Vulnerability can vary considerably from country to country. For example, the Caribbean island of Cuba is well prepared for hurricanes: vulnerability is low and few lives are lost. The neighbouring country of Haiti is much less well prepared, and consequently vulnerability is high. Hurricanes of equal strength in Haiti cause much damage and loss of life.

Even within one village, some families may be highly vulnerable to disaster – through poverty, location or type of housing, sickness in the family etc – while other families may be much less vulnerable. Some social, ethnic or religious groups may be more vulnerable than others, because they live in areas more affected by the hazard.

Within a family or household, vulnerability can vary. Women are often much more vulnerable than men. Children, the elderly and chronically sick people (including those with HIV) can also be highly vulnerable, because they are less able to escape or cope with bad conditions.

Part 2: Capacities

Explain that as well as vulnerabilities, a community will possess **capacities** or **strengths** which help to **reduce the impact** of the hazard. Capacities may consist of knowledge or skills, including traditional ways of coping with hazards. They may also include alternative crops or livelihoods, or extended family support mechanisms. Capacities are the things that will help the community to anticipate, prepare for, cope with and recover from a disaster.

It can be helpful to think of capacities in five different categories:

- Human capacities - the skills, abilities or knowledge that are within the community that are particularly useful during disaster.
- Social capacities - social groupings and leadership structures exist that are helpful during disaster.
- Constructed capacities - the buildings, tools, equipment, shelter, infrastructure, resources, assets or structures that are useful during a disaster.
- Natural capacities - the natural resources that could be drawn upon during/after a disaster.
- Economic capacities - financial coping mechanisms available, eg alternative livelihoods, sale of assets, availability of loans and saving?

Read out a list of capacities and ask people to decide which category of capacities they come within. The list could include:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good knowledge of hazards and how to cope with them • Strong early warning systems • Strong family relationships • Adequate grazing land available for animal herds • Strongly build school, church or other community structure • Road surface and bridges allow vehicles to pass for whole year • Functioning irrigation system in place • Government services well developed and responsive in an emergencies • Community has good and respected leaderships • Good health status of the population • Women empowered, their knowledge and resourcefulness respected • Skilled builders within the community • Strong local church that is active in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good relationships within the community • Savings and credit groups • Self-help groups • Skilled nurses in the community • Forest nearby • Fertile and productive soil • Farmers growing several different crops with different planting and harvesting times • Households possess saleable assets or savings • Many houses include cyclone- or earthquake-resistant design features • Emergency flotation aids available - eg coconuts, banana trees • High literacy rates • Hand-pumps elevated on platforms above potential flood water level; springs and wells have protective caps • Area of high land by the village • Well-functioning village development committee
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Finish by explaining that many capacities are hazard-specific, while others are useful against any hazard. For example, banana trees may be a capacity in a flood area, because their trunks can be tied together to make a platform or a simple boat. However, banana trees will be of little use as a capacity against earthquake! Other elements, such as savings, a radio or jewellery to sell, will be a useful capacity to aid recovery from any disaster event.

Next steps: Please follow this tool with **Tool A2: Vulnerability and capacity assessment**



Notes

Some of the explanatory text is taken from Tearfund (2011) *Roots 9: Reducing risk of disaster in our communities*

https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/roots/reducing_risk_of_disaster_in_our_communities/