

Mary Anderson sums up perfectly this week's readings in her article on a general framework for assessing vulnerability. She recounts the historical evolution of the understanding of vulnerability as it shifted from different focuses and its eventual widening of scope and coverage. Early on, she notes, natural hazards or disasters were seen as the prime cause of peoples' vulnerability specifically those who live and are in direct contact to the areas and spaces in which these hazards predominate. Thus the prevailing attitude by scientists, technologists and engineers was the building of systems and infrastructure for the prediction of these hazards at the same time development of technology that enabled people and the different structures to withstand the effects and impacts of these hazards. This attitude came from the mindset that disasters being natural couldn't be prevented. Such attitude and thinking was later regulated when the development of these structures and technologies was evaluated and qualified in terms of cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit, that is measuring the amount of vulnerability reduction produced by a structure or technology vis-à-vis its cost. This came about because the cost of the generation and production of these different technologies was expensive and communities or countries are either unwilling or unable to afford them. Also, there was a big move to assess which technologies were appropriate for differing situations and circumstances given existing economic capabilities and constraints. Thus, cost and economic value of a technology was given as high premium as its value to actually reduce vulnerability.

Both these approaches to vulnerability were later challenged by those who saw vulnerability to natural hazards as not just exposure to the hazard or inability to predict disasters or the lack of resources to do so but as a product of other human factors. Blocker et al highlights this in saying that "the interpretation of natural disasters as environmental disruptions arising solely from external forces is changing in the wake of human modification of the natural environment, modern disaster mitigation techniques, and rising expectations of the ability of humans to control nature." Morrow also breaks previous notions in her article when she describes "storms as social events" and as such vulnerability to them is a social process. Thus, the human variable to the vulnerability equation is being drawn and the blurring of the distinctions between so-called natural disasters and man-made disasters is becoming evident.

Peacock, Morrow and Gladwin illustrate this human dimension in what they describe as the socio-political ecology approach to disasters. This approach differentiates from the earlier physicalist and human ecology perspective that sees natural disasters as something that is brought about by forces external to humans. Instead, the socio-political ecology view puts humans and their activities and the consequences of those activities as a component in the creation and perpetuation of so-called natural disasters and also in the mitigation and reconstruction from the same. Nakagawa and Shaw illustrate this further as they describe the role of social capital, which they defined as a function of trust, social norms, participation and network, in recovery from disasters. They further comment that despite differing socio-cultural and economic contexts of communities, social capital and leadership amongst and within communities were found to be the common denominator in enhancing collective actions and disaster recovery.