

Reaction Paper Melissa Scudo

The readings this week examine the relationship between vulnerability and hazard. In *Access to Resources and Coping in Adversity*, Blaikie et al. define vulnerability as “a measure of a person or group’s exposure to the effects of a natural hazard, including the degree to which they can recover from the impact of that event.” Tierney et al examine vulnerability more closely, looking at the independent and inter-dependent factors that comprise vulnerability influencing a person’s behavior to disaster preparedness and response.

Tierney et. al argue that while research provides evidence that factors such as gender, age, social status, disaster experienced, ethnic and minority status, social bonds and income inequality and economic resources are factors affecting vulnerability and specifically, vulnerability to hazards, there is little empirical evidence to disentangle these factors to examine their correlation to how people can and do prepare and respond to risk.

While it is difficult to measure the correlation between vulnerability and hazards, they agree that hazards cannot be considered in isolation from vulnerability and its causes. Hazards and natural events exacerbate problems stemming from inequality and poverty and in the opposite direction, population growth, financial pressures, globalization including trade liberalization and structural adjustment programs, land degradation, global environmental change and war all contribute to increasing risk to hazards and natural events, particularly within marginalized and low-income communities and households.

I was particularly interested in the attention placed on access to resources in the chapter *Access to Resources and Coping in Adversity*. The concept of access involves the ability of an individual, household, or community to use resources which are necessary to secure a livelihood. Access is largely based on social and economic relations, including the factors of gender, class, age and status. Tierney et al argue that less access to resources leads to increased vulnerability, decreasing an individual and or community’s ability to prepare, respond and cope with risk and natural events. Vulnerability is this also shaped by the distribution of power within communities, with access also determining who has control over resources. In helping communities prepare and cope with events, therefore, it seems important to me to focus on strategies that can increase an individual and community’s access and control over resources.

Another point of interest to me was a question posed by Tierney et al about the connection between relief and recovery and development: “how can official relief and recovery practice place more attention to what people do themselves to cope?” This is an interesting and important question. How can humanitarian agencies and relief efforts incorporate and build upon the strategies that individuals and communities employ to prepare and respond to risk and hazards rather than employing external strategies that may not be adopted within the communities over the long-term? Should development efforts focus first on determining the root causes of vulnerability that place individuals at risk on a daily basis and contribute to their increasing vulnerability to larger hazards and events? How can this be done in a manner that is sustainable?