

Reaction Paper Elisa Jaramillo

In her article, Betty Hearn Morrow stresses the main point in last weeks lecture and readings: disasters are not natural – they depend on a hazard (potential for damage) but only in the presence of a vulnerable community. Vulnerability arises from the unequal access to opportunities and unequal exposure to risks both of which are a consequence of the socioeconomic and political system in place. Such inequality is seen in the household access to physical resources (appropriate location, structure), human resources (health, education, skills), social capital and political resources. In the specific case of storm vulnerability, there is a limited choice in affordable storm-resistant housing and insurance that predisposes households to greater housing damage during the event and also delays/limits the process of recovery.

The appropriate mitigation/response depends therefore in an accurate assessment of the distribution of vulnerability that is provided by community profiles which identify the extent to which vulnerable categories of people (elderly, women-headed households, disable) reside in a community.

Mary Anderson's chapter is very interesting. Though advances in the understanding of nature have allowed us to control some of its negative effects, it is clear that vulnerability continues to rise (as seen in an increase in the number of disasters and the number of people affected by these events). This has been acknowledged in the evolution of the literature dealing with the topic of vulnerability and vulnerability reduction. Initially, natural hazards were the center of concern and it was thought that vulnerability could be reduced through scientific and technological development. The effects of these developments are limited by affordability of technology and consequently, importance was then given to developing economically rational criteria for the use of vulnerability-reduction technologies. Finally, it was recognized that human actions, decisions and choices are definite factors in defining vulnerability.

It is important that the author points out that economic development does not necessarily reduce vulnerability. In the contrary, the constant search for economic security and wealth are placing developing and already developed populations (globally) at increased vulnerability. Sustainable development should be the goal but how to convince countries in development of such a fact?

Of the trends associated with economic development and increase in vulnerability I found as most interesting the trends in attitudes: rising expectations, the belief that everything is possible and the belief that rationality can be achieved through pricing. I think not enough thought has been given to them and while these trends remain there will be no recognition of the cumulative nature of vulnerability nor there will be a real search for adequate alternatives in sustainable vulnerability-reduction.

In the last reading the main topic is that of the community as an ecological network of interacting groups and organizations. I think one of the main points to keep in mind is the importance of constrained competition to avoid delays and waste of the limited resources during the response and recuperation after a disaster.