Vulnerability: Types, Causes, and Coping Mechanisms

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at bringing to limelight by explaining the concept of vulnerability specifically its types, causes and coping strategies among others. Vulnerability has threatened lives, nations and organizations at diverse magnitude. Being a common concept among health workers, the understanding of the concept is underestimated to people in other works of life. Therefore, understanding this concept will not only be of theoretical benefits but also enable vulnerable class know when they are vulnerable and how to cope with vulnerability. Though, the functioning of vulnerability is interlinked and connected to poverty among other factors. The methodology for this paper is purely descriptive. Areas covered include clarification of concepts, types of vulnerability, vulnerable groups, causes of vulnerability and coping mechanisms of vulnerability. Therefore, the paper concluded that apart from individuals, nations and organizations are vulnerable and also exposed to shocks, threats and risks that can be mitigated by deploying coping mechanisms that prevents vulnerability from becoming chronic.

Key words: Vulnerability, Types, Causes, Coping, Mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

Poverty as a global concept has suddenly given birth to vulnerability which has exposed lives, nations and organizations to severe shocks, threats and risks among others. The ability to recover from these shocks is highly dependent on the poverty level among other factors. The rates of poverty eventually determine the degree of vulnerability. Therefore, poverty and vulnerability are interdependent and affects each other. Vulnerability has been seen as a dynamic concept which recognizes change while poverty has been seen as being static (Moser, 1998). Though, it has been argued that poverty itself is dynamic, since the poor are not always poor at all times (Yaquub, 2000).

Keefe et al (1976) said vulnerability was introduced in 1970s within the discourse on natural hazards and disaster. They insisted that socio-economic conditions are causes for natural disasters. The work illustrate by means of experiential data that the occurrence of disaster increased over the last 50 years, paralleled by an rising loss of life. The work also showed that the greatest losses of life concentrate in underdeveloped countries, where they concluded that vulnerability is increasing. The concept can be defined as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard. The concept is relative and dynamic. Vulnerability is most often associated with poverty, but it can also arise when people are isolated, insecure and defenseless in the face of risk, shock or stress. People differ in their contact to risk as a result of their social group, gender, ethnic or other individuality, age and other factor. Vulnerability may also vary in its forms, poverty for example, may mean that accommodation is unable to withstand an earthquake or a storm, or lack of attentiveness may result in a slower reply to a disaster, leading to better loss of life or protracted suffering. Therefore, the reverse side of the coin is capacity, which can be described as the resources available to individuals, households and communities to cope with a threat or to resist the impact of a hazard. Such capital can be physical or material, but they can also be found in the way a group of people is organized or in the skills or attribute of individuals and organizations in the community (The International Federation of Red Cross Annual Report, 2013)

The cardinal objective of this paper is to provide individuals, nations and organizations with an in-depth understanding of the concept “vulnerability” including its types, causes and coping strategies which will enable individuals, nations and organizations identify possible ways of dealing with shocks, threats and risks in order not to allow vulnerability to become chronic. It is in this connection that the paper is divided into five phases with descriptive approach for detailed discussion, these include clarification of concepts, types of vulnerability, vulnerable groups, causes of vulnerability and coping mechanisms of vulnerability.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Poverty

In discussing vulnerability, poverty cannot be underestimated, since the functioning of vulnerability is interlinked and connected to poverty. For any society, organization and individual to be vulnerable, they are likely to be poor. Though, vulnerability has been attributed to many factors other than poverty. Damas and Rayhan (2004), perceived poverty as “a reduced or complete lack of access to material, economic, social, political or cultural resources needed to satisfy basic needs”. That is the insufficient and non-availability of the basic resources required for a healthy and improved standard of living.

According to Townsend (2006), “people can be said to be in poverty when they are deprived of income and other resources needed to obtain the conditions of life such as the diets, material goods, amenities, standards and services that enable them to play the roles, meet the obligation and contribute in the relations and customs of their society”. That is when people are restricted from the resources that grant them power to connect and network.

Karimu and Muhammad(2017) argued that poverty is better understood and appreciated as a condition in which its victims are unable to have access to the basic needs of life. These needs include not having enough to eat, safe water to drink, adequate housing and health care.

Poverty is a multidimensional concept as it varies in age, gender, culture, location, and other social and economic contexts. For example, in both rural and urban cities, men associate poverty with a lack of material assets, whereas for women, poverty is defined as food insecurity. Younger men consider poverty as the inability to access means of livelihood, whereas older men cite it as most important the status connected to a traditional norms and values. Farmers for example, linked poverty to drought while those in the city linked poverty to rising prices, fewer employment opportunities, and deterioration in domestic and international terms of trade, lack of education and absence of governance.

Therefore, poverty is what can be seen around nations, organizations and individuals that make them humiliated, insulted, defenseless, dependent and vulnerable to both private and public agents of the state from whom they seek help. Therefore, poverty drives vulnerability by exposing nations, organizations and individuals to shocks, illness, disasters, threats and risks.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability being a common concept among health workers is derived from a latinverb “vulnerare” which means “to cause damage or injury”. Pratt, et al (2004) said vulnerability refers to “the tendency of something to be damaged. The opposite of this is resilience or the ability to resist and/or recover from damage”. Vulnerability and resilience are two opposite sides of a single coin, because once shocks and threats occur, the ability to cope and resist them must be applied.

Cesar and Dercon (2005) saw vulnerability as the magnitude of the threat of future poverty. This definition is further justified with three points. Firstly, this can be seen as the magnitude of the threat to relate both to the likelihood of suffering poverty in the future and to the severity of poverty in such a case. Individuals dread the possibility of future poverty episodes and they are said to be vulnerable to the extent that poverty cannot be ruled out as a possible scenario. By the same token, their vulnerability is greater when there is a worse danger to fear and when poverty threatens to be more severe. Secondly, a threat remains as such until the uncertainty is resolved.

Thirdly, threats such as illness, crime or loneliness being faced by individuals are derived by poverty which is an epidemic.

Chambers (1989) viewed vulnerability with two sides (external and internal), the external which constitutes risks, shocks and stress to which an individual is subject to and the internal with defenseless, lack of means to cope with damaging loss. Loss can take many forms. Becoming physically weaker, inexpensively insolvent, socially dependent, humiliated or expressively harmed.

Clark et al (2000) defined vulnerability as the risk of adverse outcomes to receptors or exposure units (human groups, ecosystems and communities) in the face of relevant changes in climate, other environmental variables and social conditions.

Damas and Rayhan (2004) argued that vulnerability is exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in coping with them.

The shocks being caused by vulnerability are commonly related to illness and death, natural disasters, violence, state failure and economic collapse (Chronic Poverty Report, 2004/2005). The ability to respond to these shocks is strong-minded by the degree of susceptibility of a household. According to Ireland et al (2004) "livelihoods are vulnerable, when they are unable to cope with and to respond to exposure to risks, stresses and shocks". Although, scarcity and susceptibility are not identical, they are interlinked.

Dercon (2005) distinguished between a general definition of vulnerability in terms of weakness or defenselessness and risk-related vulnerability. Whereas the former definition refers to a general inability to take advantage of profitable opportunities, the latter refers to the likelihood that a shock will result in a decline of well-being.

Vulnerability is the degree to which a population, individual or organization is unable to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impacts of disasters (World Health Organization, 2000).

Therefore, vulnerability is a weakness and defenseless of lives, nations and organizations caused by disaster, failed institutions, bad governance and lack of effective strategies among others. It threatens lives through diseases, food insecurity, poor infrastructure, violence, low income, etc. It threatens nations through natural disasters, low economic growth, crisis, bad governance, failed institutions, etc. Finally, organizations are also threatened through leadership styles, failed policies and strategies, financial constraints and incompetent human resources among others.

TYPES OF VULNERABILITY

Karis (2016) said physical, economic, social and attitudinal vulnerability are used to describe how communities are at-risk for disaster. It is important to note that apart from communities, individuals and organizations are also threatened by political, environmental and academic vulnerability among others. The types of vulnerability mentioned above for detailed discussion comprised of diverse features and elements.

- **Physical Vulnerability:** Such vulnerability arises when nations, organizations and individuals have no access to clean water, means of communication, effective health facilities, good security, roads and electricity among others. Example is in Syria, where basic infrastructural facilities and amenities are lacking due to the ongoing crises.
- **Political Vulnerability:** Where there is no democratic and electoral process for the citizens to have access to political power and representation. Somalia is a typical example where there is no coordinated government to allow citizens participate in governance and also run the affairs of the country.
- **Social Vulnerability:** According to Damas and Rayhan (2004), social vulnerability arise as a result of rapid population growth, poverty and hunger, high level of ethnicity, low levels of education, gender inequality,

lack of access to technological means and disintegration of social patterns. This can also include religion differences and marginalization.

- **Economic Vulnerability:** This can be determined by the income levels among individuals, the bargain power, price level, inflation rate, unemployment, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross National Product (GNP) and exchange rate among others.
- **Environmental Vulnerability:** Such vulnerability is prompted by land degradation, typhoons, earthquakes, flood, hurricane, drought, storms, deforestation and fire disaster among others.
- **Academic Vulnerability:** This vulnerability arises due to lack of knowledge, expertise, conceptual experience in solving operational and routine problems at individual, group, organizational and national levels.
- **Attitudinal Vulnerability:** This type of vulnerability arises when individuals, organizations and nations have negative attitude to change and lack initiative and creativity of turning threats to opportunities.

VULNERABLE GROUPS

Vulnerable groups are individuals, nations and organizations that are exposed to threats and risks. World Health Organization (WHO,2002) said children, pregnant women, elderly people, malnourished people and ill people are particularly vulnerable when a disaster strike. United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR,2005) identified women, survivors of violence, people with physical or mental disabilities and ethnic minorities as vulnerable groups. A sector of the population, especially children, pregnant or nursing women, the elderly, the homeless, who are more prone to disease and nutritional deficiencies. They are the ones who suffer most in disaster situations including people whose possibility of choice is severely limited, frequently subject to coercion in their decision (Nichiaata, 2008). Vulnerable groups can be classified into three (3), these include societies, organizations and individuals.

- **Vulnerable Societies:** These are nations across the globe that lack the coping abilities to overcome shocks, threats and risks being caused by environmental factors, lack of political rights and social amenities as in Syria, lack of security as in Somalia, lack of power for resource control as in South Sudan. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), North Korea including countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Central America and South Asia are poor and vulnerable due to the absence of man-made socio-economic and political institutions put in place to drive the nation's economy. Other factors that bring about vulnerability among nations are bad governance, poor economic growth and lack of natural disaster control and management system (a typical example of Haiti earthquake of 2010, Philippines typhoons of 2015 and Rohingya refugees in Myanmar among others).
- **Vulnerable Organizations:** Flourishing organizations become weak to face threats, fierce competitions and risks among other forces. Poor financial status of global airlines due to Covid-19 pandemic, shortsighted and poor leadership practices experienced by Nokia, failed policies and strategies, lack of required human capital, etc. These factors restrict organizations from competing at the domestic, international and global market.
- **Vulnerable Individuals:** Poverty in the developing countries, increase in population, unemployment, diseases, hunger, violence and crises including lack of social and infrastructural facilities has exposed lives to threats and risks. As a result of these factors, many individuals have left their countries as migrants and refugees without considering the immigration requirements, and therefore, end up being harassed in the course of crossing borders, seas and tunnels to host countries. Example is the Rohingya refugees who in 2017 crossed from Myanmar to Bangladesh for safety and the Syrian refugees who are currently taking refuge in Turkey. According to International Organization for Migration (Report, 2015), over 2,000 migrants have died on the Mediterranean Sea in an attempt to cross to Europe. As many have been arrested and rescued on the Italian Island of Lampedusa for crossing to Europe.

CAUSES OF VULNERABILITY

Numerous forces and factors account for vulnerability. These factors differ in nature and magnitude depending on the type and class of vulnerability. Lack of access to information, lack of public awareness and limited access to political power and representation are responsible factors that causes vulnerability (Aysan, 1993). Damas and

Rayhan (2004) identified factors of vulnerability to include rapid population growth, poverty and hunger, poor health, gender inequality, low levels of education, fragile and hazardous location, lack of access to resources and services including knowledge and technological means. Out of these factors mentioned above, key of them are discussed in details below.

- **Population Boost**

A sharp increase in population of any nation, organization and family has both positive and negative consequences. Where a population of a country outweighs its available resources, it becomes a challenge channeling scarce resources and it brings about crises over resource control and therefore, leaving the less privileged vulnerable. The less privileged also migrate to indulge in criminal and drug related activities which makes them more vulnerable. Organizations with an increase in staff beyond its capacity will not only faced the challenge of paying workers but also find no duty and task to assign to them leading to underutilization of resources and redundancy. Families with low income and meager earnings with an increase in size will hardly cope with the basic needs of its members.

- **Chronic Poverty**

According to Hulme and Shepherd (2003), poverty is categorized into chronic and transient. Chronic is when those trapped into long-term poverty has no prospect and opportunity to improve their condition while transient is when those trapped into short-term poverty has the prospect and opportunity to improve their condition. Therefore, both chronic and transient are vulnerable but the degree of vulnerability caused by chronic poverty is much more severe, since the basic necessities such as food, housing, health care, education, water among others are completely lacking.

- **Poor Health System**

A situation where health facilities are lacking or unsupportive to cater for the health issues being faced by citizens will eventually result to high mortality and fatality rate, putting lives at risks.

- **Poor Governance**

The inability of any elected and appointed government to put in place policies, rules and regulations including economic and political institutions that will meet the needs of the masses in any country of the world will certainly threaten not only lives but also the economy of that nation. According to Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), the two cities of Nogales cut in half by fence, with Nogales Arizona in the north and Nogales Sonora in the south. The citizens of Nogales Arizona are far better than their neighbours in the south because of the functional economic and political institutions while Nogales Sonora is vulnerable due to lack of functional institutions and bad governance.

- **Gender Inequality**

A situation where roles and responsibilities are always assigned with the representation of more men than women or more women than men within a particular system makes the minority powerless, weak and vulnerable.

- **Poor Educational System**

Nations with low educational standards will always face the challenge of providing its citizens with the basic and elementary education required to liberate ignorance and therefore its citizens remain in chains lacking knowledge, experience and skills to overcome shocks and threats.

- **High Risks Areas**

Countries with its inhabitants located in different geographical zones with different climatic, environmental and man-made challenges. In the Himalayas, countries and cities are threatened by earthquakes, volcanoes and landslides while in some areas, cities are exposed to series of floods, erosions and explosions.

- **Poor Communication and Information Systems**

Countries, organizations and individuals facing communication and information challenges are vulnerable to security and competitive threats. The World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York, USA was attacked not because the communication facilities were lacking but because the information about the attack was not made known to Americans. Pepsi would have sent Coca-Cola out of the market for decades but unfortunately it has no access to the success strategy adopted by Coca-Cola.

- **Lack of Technological Means**

Without the basic and advanced technology that will drive the industrial economy, nations become dependent on other nations and also subject to stringent conditions to sustain their economy.

- **Lack of Competent Human Resource**

The insufficient skills and competencies required by nations to develop their economies make them dependent on developed economies and the implication is that, such nations are being dictated and controlled by the developed nations. This also affects organizations, as lack of competitive skills restricts them from producing and providing goods and services for the domestic, international and global market.

- **Lack of Competitive Strategies**

Organizations that lack strategies to compete with its counterparts in a given industry lose its market shares and can eventually be acquired by dominant competitors and players.

COPING MECHANISMS OF VULNERABILITY

Since vulnerability is a two-edged sword with a shocking and threatening edge and resisting and recovering edge, in an attempt to overcome these shocks, threats and risks in order to lessen the degree and magnitude of vulnerability, series of coping strategies and mechanisms are hereby suggested:

- **Functional Socio- Economic and Political Institutions**

Political institutions that are inclusive in nature by giving room for the masses to participate in the democratic and electoral processes, effective judicial system and good governance make way for the socio-economic institutions to thrive by ensuring that services like education, water, roads, health care, investment, production and diversification among others are available and effective. Therefore, the functioning of these institutions serves as safety nets and prevents citizens from becoming vulnerable.

- **Effective Natural Disaster Control and Management Programmes**

Countries and organizations in solving natural disaster issues like earthquake, flood, typhoons, hurricanes, explosions and fire, should engage the services of environmentalists and disaster control experts that will assist in designing and developing natural disaster control and management programmes in line with the climatic, environmental and man-made disaster of a particular region and also ensure that such programmes are implemented by educating and enlightening the masses.

- **Effective Educational System**

Once the educational system of any nation is effective to provide citizens with the basic knowledge, skills and experience, the weapon to fight and overcome ignorance and poverty is at their disposal, and once ignorance and poverty are defeated, citizens are no longer threatened.

- **Active Health Care System**

Health care system that can address complicated health issues will not only save lives but also increase the productivity strengthen of any nation.

- **Skills Acquisition and Job Creation**

The high level of migrants in the 21st century is a clear indication that countries are faced with unemployment apart from conflict and crises. In order to address this challenge, nations must develop entrepreneurial skills, industries and diversify their economy to prevent its citizens from stringent conditions of crossing borders in search of employment opportunities and greener pasture.

- **Technological Expansion**

Advanced technology is a tool for industrial transformation and development that has liberated countries, organizations and individuals to compete and participate favorably in the global market and economy.

- **Strategic Leadership**

The ability to ensure that organizations have an edge over its competitors, leaders across organizations must be visionary in planning and decision making in order to drive their organizations in the right direction with a futuristic mindset.

- **Good Governance**

Provision of basic needs for citizens like employment, good health care system, quality schools, good roads and effective security among other social and infrastructural facilities will discourage these citizens from leaving their countries to other countries in search of favorable environment.

CONCLUSION

Vulnerability as a common concept among health workers is dynamic and caused by so many factors other than poverty. Apart from lives, it has affected nations and organizations. Nations today are vulnerable due to failed socio-economic and political institutions which are put in place to drive their national economy. Organizations are also threatened, going by their leadership practices and styles, policies and strategies among other factors. Finally, the increase in population, unemployment, lack of security, lack of education, disease among other factors account for individual vulnerability. It is evident to say that the effect of vulnerability is not limited to lives, because societies and organizations are also threatened by it. Therefore, the above discussion on types, causes, and coping mechanisms of vulnerability is not only of theoretical benefits but also to enable individuals, nations and organizations practically deploy coping mechanisms against threats, risks and shocks which prevents the chances of vulnerability becoming chronic.

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