



The Social Construction of Vulnerability

T. Plapp

Institute for Insurance, Postgraduate Programme Natural Disasters, Universität Karlsruhe (TH), Germany (plapp@tmb.uni-karlsruhe.de / Fax: +49 721 695245)

Risk assessment approaches combine several components, among others hazard identification, hazard assessment, vulnerability assessment, etc. In the main part, these components rely heavily on formal mathematical procedures. However, wide areas of social living cannot be represented and measured with formal techniques. These areas form basic social principles that maintain the functioning and well-being of societies. Among these basic social principles are: social norms and value systems, belief systems and symbolic orders, social roles, cultural practices, social relations, power and dominion, labour and the division of labour, social stratification, exclusion and inclusion, and environmental relationships. The principles themselves are a result of permanently ongoing social processes and they are subject to social change. The principles are susceptible to disasters and, once affected, they can contribute to a (partial) collapsing of social functions.

Most of these intangible basic principles tend not to be covered in the mainstream of vulnerability assessments, mainly because it is difficult to measure them, to quantify them, and finally to put an economic value on them. A prominent example for these difficulties is the discussion on how to value or to “price” human life.

In the contribution I will discuss how vulnerability is socially constructed by societies themselves through various social and cultural practices. Therefore I will investigate and discuss how the social principles contribute to “doing vulnerability”. In order to clarify and highlight the social construction of vulnerability, I will draw upon selected disasters from different times and regions.