

ON THE LINE



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THE ENVIRONMENTAL INTER-RELATIONSHIPS OF VULNERABILITY*

Ad hoc response to only rare and extreme disasters is fallacious; it is the frequent events which need the most attention. The more frequent they are, the more normal—to the point where normality itself is the vulnerable condition to which we should respond. The small, pervasive, and frequent disasters are the indicators and part-creators of local environmental reality—inextricably inter-related with the totality of socio-economic, cultural, political, and natural environment.

Human vulnerability to disaster is a bi-product of inter-relationships of location, age, economic level, social divisions, administrative and political capacity, and integration. These factors have a bearing upon which activities are undertaken and by whom, to what efficiency and success they are practised, what options there are for change and, ultimately, whether change allows conservation or perpetrates environmental degradation. Some communities and some sectors of communities are therefore more vulnerable than others; vulnerability is not static, but dynamic, evolutionary, and accretive.

Coastal developments can be automatically at risk to floods, storm surge, tsunamis and, in many cases, can destroy protective features of mangroves and trees. Vulnerability for occupants of the immediate and neighbouring area has been increased and is exacerbated by inward migration for employment prospects. In such circumstances, to persuade developers to build better, or to institute warning systems, can be only dangerously piecemeal solutions.

Established communities in locations favourable to large-scale commercial production of sugar-cane, for example, have been displaced from their traditional resource base, and are obliged to take up marginal sites more exposed to flood, landslide, or high wind.

Dislocated rural communities at subsistence level may assume greater opportunities from spontaneous settlement in the urban peripheries, usually on the most disaster-prone slopes, ravines, and dry river beds.

Vulnerability is thus caused and compounded by activities undertaken for commercial and national economic advantage. Newly established national administrations for disaster relief are quick to identify frequently vulnerable sectors, but rarely the causes of that vulnerability. Recurrent and increasing costs of relief management upon one arm of government are being caused by activities encouraged, condoned, or perpetuated by other arms of the same governments.

In the experience of hazards in local environmental reality, interrelationships count for more than the separation of issues. The separation of "disasters" from this complexity is counter-productive—as either an academic pursuit or a national or international management strategy.

*Based upon the introduction of a report to the United Nations Environment Programme. The views expressed are those of the author.

James Lewis
DATUM International

James Lewis
DATUM International
101 High Street
Marshfield SN14 8LT
ENGLAND
BATH (0225) 891426