Part IV

SOCIAL PROTECTION IN A CHANGING WORLD

Enhancing social protection and reducing vulnerability are important goals of social development. The World Summit for Social Development recommended a rich menu of activities to advance those goals, while the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly, convened in Geneva in June 2000, underscored the importance of exploring ways and means to develop social protection systems for vulnerable and unprotected people as well as to put forward suggestions regarding new mechanisms to ensure the sustainability of those systems in various country contexts. Part IV of the present report attempts to address the twin challenge which all countries face: how to reduce vulnerability and enhance social protection as well as establish or improve social protection systems.[i] In this context, chapter XIII highlights issues related to vulnerability while chapter XIV concentrates on social protection. Some clarification of terminology and concepts may facilitate discussion and agreement on which issues need priority attention in specific local and national situations. One key concept that is subject to different interpretations is "vulnerability", which in the context of the present report means high exposure to social risks with little capacity for self-defence, protection, mitigation or coping. Another fundamental concept is "social protection", which refers to a wide set of mechanisms that ensure coverage against social risks and include not only social security – insurance and welfare programmes – but social services and other arrangements that provide means to help people to confront, mitigate and cope with social risks. Indeed, social protection can be understood as an organized institutional response that includes not only the structurally vulnerable but also everyone else

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[i] Part IV of the present report draws heavily on reports of the Secretary-General (E/CN.4/1998/5 and E/CN.5/2001/2) submitted to the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-sixth and thirty-ninth sessions, respectively.

Chapter XIII

REDUCING VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability

1.   Vulnerability or exposure to risk is certainly part of the human condition. Regardless of geography, social structure, or political and economic system, people are exposed to a wide variety of risks. Some of them may result from acts of nature, whereas others are caused by human action. These risks are also not evenly distributed among the general population; hence people are not equally exposed. While no one is without vulnerability certain individuals and groups have a much higher exposure to risk than others because of socio-demographic characteristics, economic status, physical or mental condition, age, lifestyle and so forth. Vulnerability is a state of high exposure to certain risks, combined with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and cope with their negative consequences.

2.   The degree of exposure to risks and the ability to cope with them do not remain constant throughout the life span but vary from one stage of life to another. Also, types of risk can change according to situations and circumstances. Therefore, vulnerability is a dynamic and relative concept, varying over time and across space.

3.   Since vulnerability stems from numerous sources, certain individuals and groups can suffer from multiple or cumulative vulnerabilities. Thus, one may distinguish between, for example, ecological vulnerability (living in high-risk areas); structural vulnerability (arising from such attributes as gender, race, occupation, or social class and status); and role vulnerability (stemming from relationships from which involve a high or significant degree of commitment, such as marriage or tenancy). Vulnerability, then, is rarely a one-dimensional condition. At least three dimensions of vulnerability can been identified. The risk dimension refers to a greater risk or probability of victimization and implies that those who are vulnerable have a greater likelihood of being victimized than others. The state of mind dimension is the condition that makes vulnerable individuals more afraid of victimization and its consequences than those who are not vulnerable. And

finally, the impact dimension considers the effect of victimisation, where the greater the vulnerability, the stronger and more serious the impact. As the present report shows, the last decades have not witnessed an overall reduction of vulnerability in all these three dimensions among the traditionally marginalized individuals and groups. For example, in the Andean altiplane of South America, rural communities remained highly vulnerable to climate inclemency, economic disintegration, distance from more prosperous urban centres, and to social risks, such as disease, work injury, invalidity or death due to the absence of adequate social protection schemes. Their risk, state of mind and impact dimension of vulnerability was much higher and continued largely unresolved by public policy.

4.   Although vulnerability and disadvantage are often used as if they were interchangeable, they are distinct. Disadvantage occurs when structural obstacles (i.e., obstacles created by society) inhibit access to resources, benefits and opportunities. These obstacles derive from the relationships of power, which exist in all societies, and the relative value which society gives to each group. The effects for any one group may differ depending on the societal context, but the result in all cases is increased vulnerability to poverty, oppression and exploitation. They can also compound other vulnerabilities, where they exist. The structural causes that underlie disadvantage include race, ethnicity, gender, religion, indigenous or national origin and socio-economic status.

5.   An exclusive focus on economic status as a means of judging disadvantage is incomplete. While it is true that persons or groups who are vulnerable are also frequently disadvantaged and are often particularly vulnerable because they are disadvantaged, many may be vulnerable in the absence of any economic disadvantage. For example, prosperous immigrants, wealthy older persons and successful women, although not economically disadvantaged, may be vulnerable to various forms of victimization, discrimination or exploitation.

6.   It is important to the well-being and cohesion of society to take measures to protect all its members from the risks they face at different stages in life and to overcome the disadvantages that they confront because of gender-based assumptions or by reason of their membership in a particular race, class or group. When individuals are forced by circumstance to become a burden on their families and communities, the loss to society is obvious. When individuals cannot reach their full potential, it is not only they who lose; society loses also. Both individuals and society are strengthened when all people contribute at their maximum potential.

7.   Although it is difficult to define exactly which age limits separate one period of life from another, certain identifiable periods bring particular risks: the prenatal period; birth and the perinatal period; infancy; childhood; adolescence and youth; adulthood; and old age. Combining age-related vulnerabilities with other conditions, such as disability or membership in a minority group, can result in an accumulation of risks, which can, in turn, lead to greater discrimination and segregation (see chap. XVI). The accumulation of risks has implications which go far beyond what the policies aiming to counter any single vulnerability are designed to handle. Similarly, poverty or difficulties brought on by economic transition or adjustment, when combined with the age-related vulnerabilities, may further magnify the risks people confront because they reduce the options at their command, which may then compound their vulnerability.

8.   Women and various social groups suffer structural disadvantage resulting from the nature of the societies in which they live, which have compounded vulnerabilities by hindering or denying them access to resources, benefits and opportunities and minimized their capacities to achieve sustainable livelihoods. Because gender-based roles and responsibilities continue to proscribe their choices in most places, women are particularly at risk and deserve particular attention. In addition, social groups which can be identified include ethnic and religious minorities; indigenous people; refugees and displaced persons; migrants and migrant workers, both legal and illegal, and family members left behind; prisoners and ex-offenders; addicts and former addicts; squatters; street children; people living in extreme poverty; and landless rural workers.

9.   Moreover, people in vulnerable situations run a very high risk of becoming victims of various kinds of violence, both within and outside the family. Violence affects women, children, disabled persons, older persons and others (see chap. XVII). Not only can individuals and groups be vulnerable but communities – and indeed countries – can be considered vulnerable as well. Those communities usually experience adverse structural conditions, which create a high degree of vulnerability for their members. The economic difficulties faced by a community or a country may also be coupled with a low level of public resources and consequently low social transfers, which aggravate the economic vulnerability. The latter is produced by a combination of factors that include few employment opportunities, low income, low public transfers and investment in infrastructure, inability to mobilize internal resources, scarce natural resources or inability to use the endowment efficiently, and outdated education and training.

Policies and programmes

10.   While it is widely recognized that different situations exist in different countries, there are nevertheless a number of general principles of a global nature that can be highlighted. One such principle is that development must encompass economic growth as well as effective improvements in living conditions. This can be achieved by means of a more equitable distribution of the fruits of economic growth, improving social conditions and access to assets for the people, reducing vulnerability and its consequences, and promoting social justice and empowerment. In other words, the goal of development policy must be human-centred, placing economies at the service of human beings and not the reverse. While poverty might be specific to particular circumstances, places and periods of time, its overall consequences and effects are universal. When one person is condemned to live in poverty, all people are at risk. Therefore, while programmes to combat vulnerability might be situational, the definition and the general analysis are universal.

11.   An inclusive society can be promoted through the development and implementation of policies that promote social integration on the basis of a human rights or inclusion framework. It is also a society that respects the rights of its people to life, development and full participation. The human rights approach is being recognized as the standard of legitimacy for political systems and as an instrument for shaping public policies. Inclusion implies that policies, programmes and social services should be universal and organized, planned, developed or adapted in a way that makes possible the full development of all citizens in a context of freedom, independence and full access to basic services. In addition to universality, services should be based in the proper community in question, allowing the participation of people in the decision-making that affects their lives.

12.   Social integration is a difficult objective to attain. Many Governments have enacted policies and programmes to bring communities together, enable the disabled and the elderly to play active roles, reduce deprivation, eliminate discrimination and increase mutual understanding. The Government of Armenia adopted legislation to protect the children; Singapore established an inter-ministerial committee on ageing to develop policy directions; Cuba implemented a plan of action for the disabled; Australia introduced a comprehensive and integrated approach to family; and Bolivia constituted an indigenous people council to consult with indigenous groups.[1] These are only a few of the hundreds of initiatives put forth by various institutions at the global level.

13.   Against this record of individual attempts, more or less successful depending on the country and context, the absence of substantive progress in the coverage of risks and disillusionment on the overall reduction of vulnerability in the world is vivid testimony that policy-making has lacked a values framework. The latter should involve a set of strategic principles that focus attention on the essentials affecting populations. They should include respect for the right to life and development; respect for the value of health, education and social protection, respect for the value of human differences, and diversity and respect for personal and cultural identities, all within a context that reflects universal standards of well-being. Further, it should consider the value of ethics, both for individuals and within professional and institutional settings; the value of solidarity; the value of networks that provide support to individuals, such as families or community organizations; and the value of indigenous knowledge and experiences.

14.   An excessive focus on economic variables and liberalization of markets led public policy-making in the last two decades of the millennium (see chaps. III, VI and VII). In contrast to that trend, the human rights approach emerged as an option that is based on the social well-being of all citizens and the formulation of sound economic policies that go beyond the life of a particular government. Policies should strengthen networks and organizations in the community, recognizing the essential support they can provide; institutional arrangements, government, private sector and civil society are interdependent and should be actively involved in the design and implementation of policy-making.

15.   As countries have sought or been driven to integrate more closely into the global and market-based economy, various local or community-level developments have eased what has been for many a difficult and disruptive transition. With the realization that for many countries a successful integration into the global economy will take much longer than earlier believed, more attention is being given to measures at the community level to produce the means of life through non-market mechanisms. It is important that communities improve their capacities to use their labour and natural resources to produce, directly for their own consumption, a portion of the goods and services they need. Many communities are made vulnerable by a sudden change in their traditional life strategies, and they have to be helped to develop new strategies to cope with change and to decide how to react through action, resistance or adjustment to the new environment. This often involves not an individual but a collective learning process.

16.   Through community action, people should build economic and social infrastructure (roads, irrigation systems, and schools) and avoid social conflicts and exploitation. Community-based development requires a much better use of the scarce resources available through transfers from the central Government. By adding their own resources, communities can significantly increase the productive impact of those transfers. Community works and public works are thus not only means for creating jobs but also means for enhancing community empowerment and welfare.

17.   Attention should be given not only to preparing individuals to cope with and function in society and to participate more fully in the social and economic development of their country but also to making the economic, social and physical environment friendlier to those with specific and special needs. One example is in the integration of the disabled into the workforce. This integration cannot be accomplished simply by providing appropriate training for existing jobs unless the training is accompanied by measures that make the work place accessible and operational for the disabled. Another example is the youth labour market. In most countries, young people experience unemployment at a rate from two to four times greater than the national average. One reason for the very high differentials is that new entrants to the labour force have greater difficulty locating jobs in their fields of competence than people already in the workforce. Therefore, in order to reduce the differential it is first necessary to develop a job market, through public and private employment services and other means, to inform young entrants to the labour force about available work opportunities.

18.   There may also be a need to adjust the educational system to the economic needs of the market to make the type of education provided relevant to

existing demands for labour. In addition, policies and programmes should be formulated that encourage youth to exercise their entrepreneurial talents and enter self-employment, which also has the potential to create additional jobs that are more likely to be filled by other young people. Measures to encourage and sustain youth self-employment may include management training, mentoring and the establishment of credit facilities and liberal laws and procedures conducive to the formation of small businesses.

19.   The marginalization and exclusion of certain racial and ethnic groups is not always the result of discrimination and segregation alone. Sometimes it is combined with economic, social and cultural vulnerability. The situation of gypsies in Spain, for example, as of many indigenous people, is a common example. It is important for societies to improve their capacity to understand the types of vulnerability that can arise from racial or ethnic differences and to enhance their support in an appropriate manner.

20.   The joint work of government, private sector and civil society to reduce vulnerability requires an identification of the causes of vulnerability at the community level. Organizations of civil society are particularly well placed to accomplish this task: they are everywhere. As the nature of the risks and the specific population or group concerned are identified, it is then possible to collaborate and establish specific policies to diminish those risks. A community development approach has proved successful in a number of countries. It has emphasized the extension of social services and awareness campaigns, the training of local workers and the provision of field supervisors from relevant governmental development agencies. For example, in the area of the prevention and promotion of health, the family and the community, through existing organizations, have extended health coverage to individuals who were previously not adequately protected. The Jamaican Social Investment Fund, for instance, is part of a broader community-based approach that aims to improve community infrastructure.[2]

21.   Network and referral systems are particularly useful for providing ready access to more advanced and specialized technical and human resources and to financial support. Such systems comprise components from the broader civil society and government agencies. Typically, they involve the next highest level of public administration, such as the sub-district or sub-municipal levels. Facilitating organizations from the broader civil society (those with different backgrounds, i.e., cultural, religious, ethnic) and specialized agencies of local government could best be utilized to support such network and referral systems.

22.   Employment creation is an essential component of any policy or programme that addresses poverty and aims to achieve social integration. The goal is the creation of freely chosen and productive employment. The role of self-managed enterprises, microenterprises and the informal sector requires emphasis, and should be incorporated into strategies for promoting employment and sustainable livelihoods, particularly in efforts to reduce vulnerability. Reduction of vulnerability through enhanced employment opportunities will require both policy reform and direct targeted programmes, particularly for women, workers in the informal sector and people with disabilities.

Challenges ahead

23.   If the negative consequences of vulnerability are largely the outcome of the way in which people and Governments behave, they can be reduced or eliminated by changed behaviour and attitudes on the part of people and Governments. There is an urgent need for countries to formulate policies and implement programmes that recognize and redress the existence of vulnerability in different social, economic and political relationships. Ultimately, such policies and programmes can help not only to reduce vulnerability but also to promote social integration and bring about a more just society for all people. It implies assessing the nature and extent of vulnerability in each country and ensuring that legislation, criminal justice systems and social services reduce the incidence of violence against people who are disadvantaged or at risk. The social environment should be one of cooperation among people's organizations and the promotion of democratic, transparent and accountable organizations at the community level.

24.   In developing and implementing policies, programmes and activities, respect should be accorded to indigenous knowledge, traditions and coping strategies. Culturally appropriate curricula should be developed, taking into account people's language, culture, seasonal movements and other factors. International sources of funding should support locally created radio and television programmes that utilize and promote traditional cultural solutions to national problems. Communities should be guaranteed full access to their own community resources, and communities should be able to benefit directly from the resources they have traditionally relied upon without unnecessary restriction.

25.   To ensure their welfare, people need both employment opportunities and the protection offered by a comprehensive social protection system designed to cover various risks (see chap. XIV). A number of factors, including low levels of productivity, high rates of unemployment and an insufficient tax base, can create difficulties for countries seeking to establish a sufficient social protection system. Some countries face difficulties in sustaining existing systems and the level of support they provide. To prevent and diminish multiple vulnerabilities, it is important for all countries to work to develop sustainable and comprehensive systems to provide universally a basic level of social protection.

26.   It is commonplace to note that people in vulnerable situations should be involved in drawing attention to their circumstances and promoting public awareness of their specific needs. This principle should be endorsed, but with an important rider: recent research suggests that there are situations in which vulnerable people need to connect with people in less vulnerable situations since it is the latter who often have the contacts and means to assist them. For instance, if the training and support of young people without jobs is carried out in a situation in which they simply relate to each other, then there is evidence to suggest that a culture of unemployment is reinforced and their chance of finding a job is reduced, whereas if they are enabled to meet people with good contacts then there is a better chance that they will find employment. The concept "network poverty" has been coined to describe a situation in which vulnerable people lack connections to people less vulnerable than themselves.

27.   It is worth reiterating that everyone who lives under conditions of conflict and war is vulnerable (see chap. XV). To reduce vulnerability it is essential to reduce conflict, promote social justice and support mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of differences, both within and between countries. Important measures include informational programmes to promote greater understanding of peacekeeping issues and the training of law enforcement and military personnel to prevent violence against people at risk and to promote respect for their rights.

NOTES

[1] United Nations, 1999. General Assembly Economic and Social Council, *Comprehensive report on the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development.* Report of the Secretary-General. [1] A/AC.253/13-E/CN.5/2000/2; part IV Social integration, pp.44-58.

[2] United Nations, 1999. General Assembly Economic and Social Council, *Comprehensive report on the implementation of the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development.* Report of the Secretary-General. A/AC.253/13-E/CN.5/2000/2; part IV Social integration; p.53.