

# Snakes and Ladders, Buffers and Passports: Rethinking Poverty, Vulnerability and Wellbeing

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**Much research** to date has tended to view vulnerability (and resilience) by discipline or sector, yet individuals and households experience multiple, interacting and sometimes compound vulnerabilities. Cross-disciplinary thinking is emerging as multi-dimensional vulnerability is likely to come increasingly to the fore if the outlook over the next 15 to 25 years is one of shifting and new vulnerabilities.

*Poverty and Vulnerability* – In their wide-ranging review of datasets, Dercon and Shapiro (2007) identify three key factors accounting for an individual's ability to escape long-run poverty ("ladders"): changes in economic and social assets, and/or social exclusion and discrimination, and/or location in remote or otherwise disadvantaged areas. Further, they find that an individual's descent into poverty can also be explained by temporary shocks ("snakes") such as illness and health-related expenses; social and customary expenses on marriage and funerals; high-interest private loans; crop disease; and drought and irrigation failure. Dealing with these temporary shocks often requires strategies ("buffers" and possibly "passports" for some) such as selling assets, which may result in greater vulnerability in the longer term. A common starting point in defining vulnerability is to separate sensitivity and resilience into hazard exposure (to shocks and stressors) and capacity to cope (that is, resilience and agency).

## What is vulnerability?

*Poverty, Vulnerability and Wellbeing* – "Three-dimensional human wellbeing" is emerging as a complement to the more traditional and material ways of conceptualising and measuring poverty and deprivation. McGregor (2007) emphasises that wellbeing should be conceived of as the combination of: (i) needs met (what people have); (ii) meaningful acts (what people do); and (iii) satisfaction in achieving goals (how people be). These three core dimensions of wellbeing are interlinked and their demarcations are highly fluid.

## What is 3-D human wellbeing?

*What Does Wellbeing Add to the Analysis of Vulnerability and Resilience?*

- Insecurity is a dimension of poverty and illbeing in its own right (subjective wellbeing), and perceptions of insecurity can frame and influence both material and relational domains of wellbeing.
- If insecurity is chronic or the "norm", rather than a crisis/shock, then wellbeing helps bring understanding of various sources of stressors.
- Vulnerability and resilience are not opposites. Resilience is a subset of vulnerability as capacity to cope, and wellbeing helps to identify material, relational and subjective dimensions.

- A wellbeing lens aids analysis of information on the causes of vulnerability, and considers the dynamics of vulnerability before, during and after the hazard occurs.
- Wellbeing helps move analysis from thresholds to continuums and dynamics—from vulnerability to poverty (based on a poverty-line threshold), to vulnerability to greater poverty severity—and towards a focus on processes.
- Wellbeing can help us respond to the question of "vulnerability/resilient to what?" and to identify different entitlement losses, not only in the material domain (land, labour, state transfers, remittances) but also as regards the relational and subjective dimensions. For example, the actual experience of feeling vulnerable and of being exposed as vulnerable can have implications for the behaviour of individuals or households in the future.

*Towards a New Policy and Research Agenda* – Analysing vulnerability through a three-dimensional human wellbeing lens illuminates a number of avenues for future thinking. For example, how do entitlement failure types (production-based entitlement, labour entitlements, trade entitlements, transfer entitlements) interact with stressors and shocks? And how are vulnerability and resilience transmitted across time and generations? Recognising that relational and subjective aspects of wellbeing vary according to an individual's or household's position in society is central to understanding how exposure to risk is experienced (do attributes such as class, ethnicity and gender, for example, affect what kinds of snakes and ladders are faced?) and how it is addressed.

Moreover, how does the nature of the exposure (shock or stressor, for example) shape vulnerability and resilience? Under what circumstances does a response to an exposure negatively affect vulnerability in the longer term? Finally, taking into account subjective differences, there is also a need to identify which buffers and entitlements are likely to provide the best form of defence against various risks. Clarifying these matters could have important implications for future policy geared to building resilience and reducing vulnerability.

## References:

Dercon, S. and J. S. Shapiro (2007). *Moving On, Staying Behind, Getting Lost: Lessons on Poverty Mobility from Longitudinal Data*. Manchester, Global Poverty Research Group.

McGregor, J. A. (2007). 'Researching Wellbeing: From Concepts to Methodology', in I. Gough and J. A. McGregor (eds), *Wellbeing in Developing Countries*. Cambridge, Cambridge University, 316–50.