Bridging the Gap between Vulnerable Groups and Vulnerable Situations: Towards an Integrative Perspective on Vulnerability for Disaster Risk Reduction
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Bridging the gap between vulnerable groups and vulnerable situations: Towards an integrative perspective on vulnerability for disaster risk reduction

Keywords: disaster risk management; disaster risk reduction; pandemic; vulnerability
## Contents

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 3  
Vulnerability as a contested concept ........................................................................................................ 4  
  The concept of vulnerability ....................................................................................................................... 4  
  Two concepts for operationalizing vulnerability ......................................................................................... 5  
  Why neither approach is sufficient, but both are needed ............................................................................... 6  
Political implications of a dynamic understanding of vulnerable groups for disaster risk management ................................................................................................................................. 10  
  Adjust the way we speak about vulnerability and vulnerable groups .......................................................... 11  
  Strengthen the linkage of disaster risk management and social politics to reduce vulnerability ...................... 12  
  Adapt disaster risk governance to prevent vulnerability from manifesting .................................................... 13  
  Turning, but not leaving the task of reducing vulnerability, to the local sphere ........................................... 14  
  Considering challenges and situations rather groups ................................................................................... 15  
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 17  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................ 19
Introduction

The concept of vulnerability has been used since the early days of disaster research and endorses the idea that disasters do not necessarily follow from specific events but depend on their interaction with specific societies (Tierney, 2014, 2019; Wisner 2016). During recent decades, and as proved by its prominence in recent UN disaster management frameworks, such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN, 2015) and the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN-GA, 2005), the debate concerning the role of vulnerability in disaster risk reduction has increasingly gained momentum. Although this societal dimension of disasters is by no means an innovation of modern times, in recent decades a far more structured approach to identifying the factors which constitute vulnerabilities has been developed (McEntire, 2005). In this vein, the complexity of vulnerability has become generally acknowledged, which concerns the questions of how and to whom vulnerability is attributed. This has led to the following definition of vulnerability in the context of the United Nations disaster risk reduction policy: “The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards” (UNDRR, 2021). This definition and the associated guidelines, such as the 2015 Sendai Framework (UN, 2015), lead international disaster management efforts and allow for a structured approach on reducing vulnerabilities.

At the same time, and despite the definition above, the concept of vulnerability is still – and might, for good reasons, always be – highly contested with regard to its conceptualization and operationalization. This is not only a pragmatic question of how vulnerability can be approached in the best way for the strengthening of society but also the fundamental questions of who is deemed vulnerable for what reasons (e.g., are we all vulnerable to some extent or are there particular groups which are vulnerable?), what creates vulnerability and how vulnerability can be measured.

Two approaches are at the core of the discussion: (a) a group narrative, which assumes vulnerability to be a consistent, unchangeable and thus naturalised ontological characteristic of certain entities such as individuals or sociodemographic groups and (b) a narrative assuming vulnerable situations to be a dynamic characteristic of all potential entities. The former understanding (a) builds on specific individual characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, disabilities or poverty, as core aspects of vulnerability, in order to define vulnerable groups that are considered specifically vulnerable (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004). In contrast, the latter approach to vulnerability (b) stresses the highly dynamic nature of vulnerability, with all people and societal entities potentially being subject to situations that render them vulnerable, using the narrative of vulnerable situations (Wisner et al., 2004).

As this paper argues, both approaches are worthwhile, but require scrutiny of the shortcomings they entail. While the approaches are seemingly contradictory, they can and should be reconciled, as this paper demonstrates. This paper aims to outline and characterise such an approach. Starting with a presentation of the general concept of vulnerability (subsection 2.1), the paper shows its specific conceptualizations of defining vulnerable groups and vulnerable situations (subsection 2.2). Building on this, the paper demonstrates that neither of the two established conceptualizations of vulnerability is sufficient to provide an analytically substantiated, ethically acceptable and practically applicable framework for disaster risk management. Therefore, a combination of both is necessary (subsection 2.3). Finally, these theoretical considerations are translated into concrete political implications in
section 3. This is achieved through five approaches: an adjustment of the ways we speak about vulnerability (subsection 3.1); a stronger linkage of disaster and social politics (subsection 3.2); improved disaster risk governance (subsection 3.3); a turn to local and community-related ways to operationalize vulnerability (subsection 3.4); and the inclusion of a challenge- and situation focused approach (subsection 3.5). Finally, the conclusion reflects on the potentials and problems of the proposed approach to understand and finally reduce vulnerability in and for disaster risk reduction.

**Vulnerability as a contested concept**

The following section presents the general idea of vulnerability and the currently prevailing approaches to its conceptualization: vulnerability as a consistent characteristic of certain entities or groups, and vulnerability as a dynamic characteristic of all entities (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004).

**The concept of vulnerability**

Although the concept of vulnerabilities, broadly understood as the lack of capacities to deal with an extreme event and prevent it from becoming a disaster, is not a modern innovation, more structured research on the factors and mechanisms determining the degree of vulnerability have only emerged in recent decades (see Cannon, 1994; Cutter et al., 2003; Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004; Wisner et al., 2004; Wisner 2016; Bolin and Kurtz, 2018; Tierney, 2019). As early as 1755, Jean-Jacques Rousseau described a social dimension of disasters when writing about the Lisbon earthquake of that year. Indeed, the earthquake and the associated devastating fires in the city motivated Rousseau’s argument that the loss of life and property might not only be understood as a result of the natural event as such, but should also be linked to how the infrastructure and social practices contributed to the disastrous consequences of the events (Tierney, 2019: 26; Dynes, 2000). Disaster should, therefore, be understood not merely as a consequence of extreme events, but as a potential outcome of these events interacting with specific societal incapacities.

On one hand, recognizing this social dimension allows for a description and explanation of the ways seemingly similar events unfold or how disasters develop. On the other hand, it refers to the possibility of changing the outcome of an extreme event through appropriate preparedness and building individual, organizational and/or societal capacities (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004; Wisner et al., 2004; Birkmann, 2005). The more vulnerabilities are decreased, the less the impact of an extreme event and the potential of a disaster might be. Arguing from a more normative perspective and referring to an imperative to prevent harm and suffering, we might even outline a responsibility to reduce vulnerability, as highlighted in the UN Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Since the 1970s, a broad both scientific and practical discussion on the factors and mechanisms that constitute vulnerability has evolved (Hilhorst and Bankoff, 2004; McEntire, 2005). Beginning with geographical characteristics, settlement policies and buildings

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1The adjective “extreme” in this context is used to outline the non-normal character of an event, as being especially strong, long lasting and so forth. In this vein, the attribution “extreme” is highly dependent on the system its use is embedded in, since exactly the same event might be seen as normal in a different context.
standards (UN-GA, 1968; UN-DRO, 1976; UN-DRO, 1980), the sources or factors of vulnerability were expanded to include not only individual characteristics, socio-economic factors and government systems (UN-DHA, 1994; UN-ISDR, 2004; UN-GA, 2005; Perry, 2007; Christie et al., 2016) but also temporal and situational components (Blaikie et al. 1994; Christmann et al., 2011; IFRC, 2016: 43). In line with this, a better understanding of the individual capacities of entities and structural conditions emerged. A core example of these discourses was the threat to those living in slums. Taking a closer look at their situation, poverty was identified as a core aspect of vulnerability. If people lack financial capital, they are forced to live in certain affordable areas which might be more prone to extreme events as well as making the construction of infrastructure appropriate to the existing risks impossible. Such cascading effects and intersections between social structures and individual living conditions were emphasized not only by the Yokohama Strategy but also by its successor, the Hyogo-Framework (UN-DHA, 1994; UN-GA, 2005). Finally, these developments converge in the term “social vulnerability”, which describes a people-centred approach focusing on social entities and societal structures, rather than on primarily material aspects (e.g., the built environment) (Wisner et al., 2004; Cannon, 2017).

In line with this increasing complexity, a core topic of the scientific debates became the question of the operationalization of vulnerability to make it useful for application in disaster management, such as planning, preparedness, relief and recovery. Without going into detail on the specific design of the huge amount of vulnerability-related research (see, for instance, McEntire, 2005; Tierney, 2014; Wisner, 2016), we argue that the current debate is characterized by two main approaches: operationalizing vulnerability as a characteristic attributed to certain entities, and vulnerability as a characteristic of situations individuals are in and, therefore, universal. The following subsections take a closer look at these two approaches, their use in current scientific and practical contexts, as well as their benefits and shortcomings. We subsequently argue that reducing vulnerability requires both approaches to be taken into account.

**Two concepts for operationalizing vulnerability**

The first approach understands vulnerability as a characteristic of societal entities. It builds on the core insight of vulnerability research that the lack of capacities is spread neither randomly nor equally (IFRC, 2018; CRED, 2020). Rather, there are recurring patterns of individuals hit particularly hard in almost every disaster. Those are, typically, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, women and ethnic-, cultural-, religious minorities, as well as people living without a social network or in poverty (IFRC, 2018). Vulnerability is thus ascribed to particular groups that are produced along sociodemographic markers such as age, gender, race, class and religion (Tierney, 2019). This narrative of certain vulnerable groups has emerged and become a widespread terminology (Coppola, 2007; Sparf, 2016), both in scientific venues and in practice (see, e.g., UN-GA, 2005). In the vulnerable groups' paradigm, vulnerability becomes an ontological, hence irreversible, characteristic of some individuals who are grouped into populations along one or more particular marker. From a disaster management perspective, these characteristics are the basis for special supportive measures, which differ from those for an imagined “general” population (Kailes and Enders, 2007). With regard to counter measures, this refers to specific operational procedures and strategies for supporting or rescuing these groups. This definition of vulnerable groups not only allows the distinction of certain groups’ specific needs from those of other members of society but makes both the assessment of vulnerability as well as its reduction much more feasible and measurable.
However, it not only describes but equally produces vulnerable groups that are then treated predominantly not as active agents but as somewhat deficient objects of specifically designed relief measures.

Originating from the same insight, a second, slightly different view on vulnerability has emerged. It does not consider vulnerability to be an attribute of particular people, but asks what (structural) factors hinder individuals from coping with extreme events. There is a stream of research which argues for a closer look on those situations in which individuals become (rather than are) vulnerable (see Wisner et al., 2004). Instead of emphasising a strong relationship between certain individual characteristics, these scholars refer to vulnerability as a more complex, societally produced phenomenon. As in the vulnerable groups approach, this reading also considers vulnerability to result from limited coping capacities of their referent objects. However, these limited capacities are not rooted in pre-given characteristics of individuals or groups – as in something like an ontological attribute – but are the result of societal conditions and structures determining how different people are able to deal with different situations. Such a reading of vulnerability is highly contextual and refers to the interaction and interdependence of personal attributes and societal structures. This has been famously described in Blaikie et al.’s (1994) Pressure and Release Model. The authors outline how a fundamental lack of access to power, structures and hierarchies, in combination with dynamic pressures and social developments, leads to unsafe conditions and results in vulnerability (Blaikie et al., 1994; for updated version see Wisner et al., 2012). In this reading, vulnerability is not found in individuals or groups but societally co-produced. Thereby, the prevailing social order creates privileges and marginalities that then render some more vulnerable than others. Moreover, this understanding of vulnerability is based on temporal and situational factors, as well as on the specific hazard (Wisner et al., 2004; Mechanic and Tanner, 2007; Stough and Mayhorn, 2013; Wisner, 2016). The latter refers to both, the different possibilities and modalities to prepare, and the heterogeneous capacities a societal entity is required to activate to adequately deal with a given situation. The Access Model by Wisner et al. (2004) describes this emergence of contexts through the interaction of particular hazards with living situations and disaster management. Accordingly, being vulnerable is neither a characteristic of some nor is it static. Every societal entity, ranging from the individual to the global sphere, might lack the capacities to deal with a particular (extreme) event, due to its specific situation. This produces the narrative of vulnerable situations, which can also be found in the UN Sendai Framework (UN, 2015).

Why neither approach is sufficient, but both are needed

Against this backdrop, the crucial question is: what to do with these two approaches, research-wise? Is there one approach that is more appropriate for the improvement of disaster risk management, and what might be the reasons for this? The following section takes up these questions and argues that not only is neither approach sufficient, but a combination of both is necessary. The starting point for this argument is a closer look at the benefits and shortcomings of both approaches.

Firstly, we consider the narrative of vulnerable groups and the way it is implemented. Here, it becomes apparent that vulnerability tends to be understood as an attribute of certain, but not all, entities (Wisner et al., 2004; Kelman and Stough, 2015, Wisner, 2016: 6). As a result of many different examples from previous events, children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, women, and ethnic-, cultural- or religious minorities as well as the poor are considered
vulnerable, while the middle-aged non-disabled white male is usually not (IFRC, 2007; Stough and Kang, 2015; Sparf, 2016).

However, this narrative is problematic for two reasons. On one hand, it lacks an aspect of potentiality and an acknowledgement of the intersectional contexts that individuals might be in. A rich male with a disability who does not have to care about institutionalized social support will likely have different capacities in a disaster than a poor female person with disabilities. This narrative can be identified at different levels during the COVID-19 pandemic yet is more implicit than explicit. The pandemic has challenged the notion of who is vulnerable in an unprecedented way. Indeed, in addition to elderly people or those with pre-existing health conditions, there are individuals who are not addressed by pre-defined assumptions on vulnerability but who become vulnerable in the face of the pandemic and its political treatment, due to their socioeconomic situation (Mogaji, 2020). Furthermore, national and regional lockdowns in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic rendered those who are usually considered highly capable and adaptive increasingly vulnerable. The shutdown of care services (e.g., school, childcare, day care for care-dependent relatives), the strong limitation of social contacts, the scrutiny of social certainties (e.g., job security) and the change in daily routines and practices (e.g., home office) resulted in severe changes in those structures that many people’s lives are built on and depicts their vulnerability to the consequences of the pandemic (Eskyté et al., 2020; Farkas and Romanuik, 2020). In this reading, disaster management strategies themselves have caused new vulnerable situations for some, while aiming to reduce them for others. This example demonstrates how vulnerable situations are the result of complex interplays between events, societal structures and patterns of action.

However, this description (re-)produces a strong distinction between those considered somewhat vulnerable and negatively deviant, and those said to be non-vulnerable. Most of the time, this goes hand in hand with other accompanying narratives such as that of ‘special needs groups’ (Kailes and Enders, 2007). What both have in common is that they willingly or unwillingly create images of normality, which disaster risk management measures aim to uphold (Sparf, 2016). Nonetheless, it remains unclear what makes these needs special and why these criteria only apply to those currently considered vulnerable. For instance, what is the difference between the need for information of a person with a hearing or visual impairment, a person who does not have enough money to buy an appropriate device such as a smartphone and a tourist who does not speak the native language? All three individuals have the same need for information but different functional challenges to overcome to acquire the information (Kailes and Enders, 2007). However, only the first person is commonly placed in the category of vulnerable groups or ‘special needs groups’. This goes so far that Kailes and Enders found that, in 2007 in the US, about 50% of the whole population was considered ‘special needs groups’, rendering this categorization meaningless (Kailes and Enders, 2007). In addition, this strong distinction is also relevant in practical terms regarding the distribution of resources. To describe individuals’ needs as special and therefore different from the rest of society often leads to a subordination of those needs under the ‘normal’ needs of a majority. Recognizing that resources for disaster preparedness and resources in disasters are often scarce, using a vulnerable groups narrative in an unthinking way might therefore pose the contradictory risk of increasing disadvantages (Daniels, 2016: 106; Begg, 2018; Parthasarathy, 2018).

On the other hand, and closely related to this, is the tendency of the vulnerable groups narrative to support a deterministic and even static understanding of vulnerability (Hilhorst and
Bankoff, 2004). In this vein, the above-mentioned groups are envisioned as being ontologically predisposed to being vulnerable, due to their individual characteristics. As such, being a person with disabilities becomes a dominant marker for being vulnerable, without considering temporal or situational factors. There are at least three problematic implications of this understanding. First, this approach neglects the heterogeneity of the members of these groups. Remaining with the example of persons with disabilities, not only are there different types of impairments (visual, auditory, mobility, neurological, cognitive, medical and psychological), but their levels of expression also differ. Against this backdrop, it is highly unlikely that they all cause similar levels of vulnerability, not to mention the influence stemming from the particular type of hazard (Alexander, 2015). Building on this, a deterministic and static understanding tends to overshadow existing individual capacities with a deficit-oriented view on inabilities (IFRC, 2004: 13-16; Wisner, 2016: 6-8). Although it is important to identify where individuals lack the capacities to help themselves, to overlook what a person is able to do not only risks devaluing this person but might even lead to a failure to achieve a core aim of disaster risk management, the appropriate use of resources. For instance, if hearing impaired and deaf persons do not receive information, such as warning or behavioural requests, they might not act accordingly, leading to a need for support from others. If, on the other hand, information is provided in a language they understand, they might be able to use their capacities and help themselves (Grove, 2014; Sparf, 2016). In this regard, sign language should not be considered any differently from any phonetic language. This leads to the third argument which can be raised regarding a deterministic and static understanding of vulnerable groups, namely, its ignoring of the social and structural role in the emergence of vulnerability (Fielding and Burningham, 2007). The discrimination of some individuals based on certain characteristics is rooted in disadvantaging structures and systems and therefore also linked to power and hierarchies (Wisner et al., 2004; Hartman and Squires, 2006). By addressing issues of power and hierarchies and allowing for equal social participation, large parts of the ‘special’ vulnerability which is attributed to some groups might be decreased. In other words, to speak of vulnerable groups should not be misunderstood as taking their vulnerabilities as a given basis on which measures should be built. Rather, each lack of capacity itself needs to be scrutinized, in order tackle its root causes.

Despite countering much of the above-mentioned criticism, the narrative of vulnerable situations also has strong limitations. By emphasising that vulnerability should not be understood as a characteristic of entities, but as a result of certain living conditions and situations entities that are in, this approach opens up the status of being vulnerable to every entity. Every entity can become vulnerable based on the specific interaction of individual, structural, systematic, temporal and situational characteristics. Taking into account this degree of potentiality might help to overcome some tendencies to (re-)produce stereotypes of who is in need or not fit enough for a crisis. At the same time, this understanding generates a level of complexity that is highly difficult to address at both a scientific and practical level. For instance, for risk and disaster managers, one issue is knowing that there are a number of elderly people living in a certain area and, thus, allocating resources to help all of them. Another issue entirely is to argue that vulnerability might be highly diverse and therefore not all elderly people might need help and the elderly may not be the only ones in vulnerable situations. Both approaches have their own advantages, but, at the same time, do not allow for appropriate planning.

A second objection that might be raised against the narrative of vulnerable situations is that it might still lead to the same results as those of the narrative of vulnerable groups. This is the
case when we see particular sociodemographic groups (e.g., children or the elderly, but also intersectional groups) being mostly subject to vulnerable situations. However, while the result might look the same, the means of analysis differs fundamentally. While a vulnerable groups approach would ask how to protect the persistently vulnerable groups, a situational approach would scrutinise the conditions of becoming vulnerable in the first place. It would question the societal processes that may have led to the increased vulnerability of some people in more frequent situations. Thereby, the vulnerable situations approach paves the way for preventing the re-production of those discriminations and marginalising structures that a vulnerability approach should seek to tackle.

Against the backdrop of these arguments, neither of these approaches is sufficient to serve as a blueprint for disaster risk reduction. Rather, both have their advantages and challenges. What does this mean for disaster risk management? How should disaster risk management proceed, to reduce vulnerabilities and decrease the risk of disasters? And especially, what could be the merit of the Sendai Framework’s emphasis on the narrative of vulnerable situations? We argue that answering these questions is as easy in theory as it is difficult in practice: future-oriented disaster risk management has to find ways to combine a complex understanding of vulnerability as dynamic and dependent on situations with a necessarily much less complex consideration of vulnerability via the definition of certain groups and needs.

In fact, the concept of vulnerability, and particularly the static version of thinking along pre-defined vulnerable groups, runs the risk of re-producing stereotypes of seemingly deficient individuals or whole world regions (like a vulnerable global South). This kind of victim blaming may be problematic. Moreover, a situational understanding of vulnerability might reveal pitfalls if it limits itself to technological fixes. In this case, the situational vulnerability is to be mitigated not by scrutinising societal conditions, but by transferring quick fixes to fight symptoms rather than root causes. Bankoff (2001: 25) demonstrated that, in the 1990s, four out of five goals on mitigation propagated during the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction dealt with technical issues and technological knowledge transfer. While such an approach might legitimate external interventions (e.g., international activities on disaster risk reduction; see Bankoff, 2001), it obscures how societal structures determine vulnerable situations on different scales, ranging from the local distribution of privileges and goods to the global trade regime. Thereby, vulnerability limits the analytical focus to deficits and shortcomings. This leads to the creation of the passive, vulnerable object – of the other – that is protected, enhanced or helped. In so far as analysing vulnerability should always aim to unfold potentials to act, to adapt and to strive. It should be linked to resilience and contextual knowledge as the idea of capacities that result from the particular contexts rather than from transferred generalised knowledge (Bankoff, 2001; Chandler, 2014).

In general, this requires the reflection and scrutiny of existing strategies for attributing vulnerability. Starting from those who are currently considered members of vulnerable groups (the elderly, children and so on), a closer look must be taken at the heterogeneity, of their members as well as at the reasons that render them vulnerable in relation to other factors. In this way, the following problematic tendencies can be addressed:
vulnerability should not be understood as an exclusive characteristic of a few but as a characteristic which is dynamic over time, even on an individual level;

becoming vulnerable should not be traced back solely to individual characteristics but to the embeddedness of these characteristics in social contexts that can be changed through proper policy interventions;

individuals, especially for disaster management purposes, should not be perceived as defined by one characteristic but as intersectional beings;

the categorisation of vulnerability should not be understood as deterministic and static over time but as dynamic, depending on certain situations.

The following section will present more detailed reflections on how this can take place.

**Political implications of a dynamic understanding of vulnerable groups for disaster risk management**

The way in which vulnerability is addressed in disaster risk management policies matters. It produces understandings of vulnerability and therefore vulnerability as such. A conceptualisation of vulnerability as described in section 2 entails at least four political implications that are detailed here. Firstly, we argue that an adjustment of the way, vulnerability is politically addressed is necessary. This adjustment starts when we speak of vulnerability as something that is neither a stigma nor an unchangeable characteristic. Indeed, we need to analyse who is made vulnerable due to which social structures. Secondly, the paper argues that vulnerability needs to be addressed by linking social policies with disaster risk management. Taking up the need to change everyday structures that determine vulnerability, disaster risk management not only needs to start before the disaster but must consider the possibility of reducing the risks of events becoming disasters in the first place. Daily injustices, marginalisation and discrimination are most likely to be amplified in disasters. Linking social and disaster policies is thus a means to tackle the root causes of uneven distributions of vulnerability. Thirdly, improving disaster risk governance is then necessary to tackle those vulnerabilities that are not based in everyday life but sparked by the disrupting effects of disasters. While disasters exacerbate existing societal problems, they also cause new and unprecedented ones, by disrupting those support and supply structures that mitigate vulnerability in daily life. Finally, meaningful vulnerability discourse needs to operate on different political and societal levels. The local level, with its contextualisation of every otherwise abstract analytical claim should serve as the prime scale for pursuing disaster risk reduction. However, while complexity characterises societies as well as the cascading effects of disasters, the local turn must not be misunderstood as an abdication of regional, national or global structures from their responsibility. Fair burden sharing on different levels, ranging from the local to the global, is necessary for a successful reduction of disaster risks. Although all these approaches are not new as such, bringing them together in an attempt to build an understanding of vulnerability which is both more complex while aiming to be of use for preparedness planning, might allow for an important reframing.
Adjust the way we speak about vulnerability and vulnerable groups

The debate about vulnerability needs to be informed by disaster research, reflecting on physical, social, economic, cultural and environmental factors, as well as how they are intertwined in causing and mitigating vulnerabilities. An approach that helps in this endeavour is intersectionality, which can be defined as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (Davis, 2008: 68). Kathleen Tierney argues that vulnerability is not determined by a single factor (e.g., age) but is the result of a complex relationship between different attributions, like class, race, gender and age (Tierney, 2019) – to name just a few. These attributions are based on imaginations of normality, societal structures and therefore arising systems of privilege and marginalisation. Vulnerability is thus contingent, since

”[...] people are not born vulnerable, they are made vulnerable. [...] [D]ifferent axes of inequality combine and interact to form systems of oppression – systems that relate directly to differential levels of social vulnerability, both in normal times and in the context of disaster. Intersectionality calls attention to the need to avoid statements like ‘women are vulnerable’ in favour of a more nuanced view [...]” (Tierney, 2019: 127–128).

This intersectionality approach is gaining traction in the academic and political discourse (see Kuran et al., 2020). As such, intersectionality contributes to a dynamic understanding of vulnerability, which can shift and change over time and space and emerges from the particular context of a situation (Tierney, 2019: 125). While such a reading of vulnerability helps to uncover problematic structures before disasters occur, it struggles to render vulnerability actionable (Gabel, 2019).

For this sake, improving the ways we speak about vulnerability encompasses three aspects. First, it means scrutinizing ones’ own perspective and concepts of social homogeneity. Although individuals share characteristics with others, building groups always runs the risk of creating homogenizing images of individuals which tend to elevate these characteristics beyond an intersectional understanding. However, individuals have an age and gender, they might have impairments, a cultural heritage, beliefs, a socioeconomic status and so forth. To consider this social diversity means to understand vulnerability as, to a large extent, individual.

Second, creating a preventive vulnerability discourse is to mitigate those problematic societal structures that unduly disadvantage individuals and societal groups. Such a discourse needs to acknowledge that vulnerability is a shared, but differentiated attribution that potentially affects everyone. And yet, the societal discourse about vulnerability needs to scrutinise why vulnerability does not affect everyone equally and what level of inequality is (for whom) acceptable. Such a discourse needs to look more generally into processes of marginalisation, stigmatisation and exclusion that impede people’s potential to act. Further, it works alongside different categories and their mutual interaction. In this regard, a new narrative on vulnerable groups has to argue that every individual is to be considered vulnerable to a certain (dynamic) level, depending on the specific interactions of individual, structural, situational and temporal characteristics.

Third, to be vulnerable has to be understood as an ad hoc description of a certain status, due to a particular (vulnerable) situation (e.g., an event, an affected area or a particular facility like a hospital). Drawing from the structural knowledge gained in the first step, this ad hoc definition
of vulnerability mobilises particular (intersectional) patterns of vulnerability, to heuristically identify and prioritise people in need of help, according to the particular context. The evacuation of a kindergarten would, for instance, entail a different vulnerability assessment than the evacuation of a shopping mall. Even if the same group of people were affected, different hazards – like a heat wave or a flood – would lead to different patterns of vulnerability. Vulnerability assessments are therefore always spatially and temporally specific and relate to particular hazards causing particular contexts.

**Strengthen the linkage of disaster risk management and social politics to reduce vulnerability**

The call to reduce vulnerability and to enhance resilience has gained momentum in international disaster management policies (UN, 2015). However, as critics have rightly pointed out, this call often results in an undue responsibilization of the individual and the local sphere (Kaufmann, 2013). Thereby, responsibility, not power, is devolved (Joseph, 2018: 189). This is problematic, since it makes the failure to protect oneself an individual one and obscures the view on problematic societal structures (Evans and Reid, 2014: 42). However, the research on disaster vulnerability has impressively demonstrated that individual vulnerability is determined by socio-demographic factors such as class, gender, ability and race (Tierney, 2019). Consequently, the role of structural factors can hardly be overestimated. Intersectional patterns of vulnerability are the result of multi-dimensional societal discriminations. This demands the consideration of how political strategies can remedy rather than problematic inequalities. Thinking of vulnerability as the lack of ability to react or adapt to disasters neglects structural – thus contingent – reasons and pathologizes the lack of potential at the level of the individual and/or community. This, in turn, runs the risk of victim blaming.

As described in the previous section, linking vulnerabilities to structural reasons allows for taking into account those structures that determine the ability to activate individual capacities in disasters. Disaster resilience needs to be fostered rather than demanded. Inclusionary and welfare policies are two avenues for pursuing this aim. While welfare policies are crucial for building economic and social capital, inclusionary policies are required to dismantle those constraints resulting from ableist policies (Krüger, 2019a). In fact, disaster research has demonstrated that economic status (Tierney, 2019) and the availability of social networks (Aldrich and Meyer, 2015) strongly influence the vulnerability of individuals and groups. A lack of inclusivity disables people and renders them particularly vulnerable to disaster situations (Alexander, 2015). The lack of consideration of needs that are deviant from an anticipated able-bodied normality thus creates vulnerability. Marginalising processes that exist in daily life are exacerbated during disasters (Krüger, 2019b). From this perspective, vulnerability is the result of necessarily imperfect welfare and inclusionary policies, rather than their cause or motivation. Since unforeseen events with unanticipated cascading effects come upon societies with finite resources to grant security and to provide people with the means to meaningfully take action, the existence of vulnerability is not a policy failure per se but a consequence of the limits of preparedness. However, this should motivate policymakers to consider how to best use social welfare and inclusionary politics to reduce vulnerability and foster resilience. The modes of economic (re)distribution and societal inclusion shape vulnerable groups, who then are a product of social policies rather than unchangeable and fixed groups to be considered in disaster management and risk reduction plans. The contingency of vulnerability becomes obvious when speaking about the increased vulnerability of poor people (Tierney, 2019), but also holds true for other factors that increase vulnerability.
Decreasing vulnerability in disasters thus needs to start in daily life policies. Policies that deprive a part of the population of those capacities necessary to adapt and to cope with shocks need to be particularly scrutinised. Resilience demands “to keep options open” (Holling, 1973: 21), as the ecologist Crawford Holling famously stated. Vulnerability, as a lack of options to cope with a particular situation, is best mitigated by providing people with the means to act. Vulnerability is not a deficit of particular individuals or sociodemographic groups. Equally, it should not be interchanged with inability but motivate the analyses of those circumstances and structures that prevent those considered vulnerable from unfolding their potential. Therefore, policymakers need to enter dialogue with those welfare sectors that influence the social and economic situation of so far underprivileged societal groups. In the absence of absolute resilience, the level of adequate provision of capacities and adequate means to facilitate social embeddedness and reduce societal exclusion are subject to societal deliberations. These negotiations are important, as they urge authorities to recognize often marginalised needs. This form of idealist recognition is important, as it pays attention to those needs that are deviant from an anticipated normality. However, it needs to be backed up by a material recognition in the form of redistribution or inclusionary investments to cause an emancipatory effect, thus fostering societal justice (Fraser, 2003). This approach introduces disaster management to daily life. Not by repeating the perpetual possibility of disrupting events, but by preventively granting those capacities that enhance actionability in extreme situations, can vulnerabilities be reduced— even before they actualise in the face of disrupting events.

Adapt disaster risk governance to prevent vulnerability from manifesting

Disaster risk governance concerns the way in which public authorities, civil servants, media, the private sector and civil society coordinate at local, national and international levels to manage and reduce disaster-related risks (UNDP, 2013). Disaster risk governance is characterized by a process of identifying, assessing, prioritizing and settling risks. Disaster risk governance has a strong focus on risks and hazards, and vulnerability is mainly the result of a hazard. As such, it is identified ex post. However, analyses of vulnerability and the use of the intersectionality perspective can help disaster risk governance to identify vulnerabilities ex ante. Indeed, vulnerability analyses combined with intersectionality are able to address questions concerning who is vulnerable in what way and for which reasons. Vulnerability is derived from a combination of factors which must be known and confronted by disaster risk governance to trigger responses that properly cope with vulnerability (Bolin and Kurtz, 2018). Thereby, vulnerability must not be portrayed as an impediment to action. Most disaster management policies referring to the role of individual and societal actionability are based on the concept of resilience. They assume and seek to channel agency and potential. Powerlessness or the partial inability to live up to formulated requirements and actions, in contrast, lies beyond these disaster management policies (Kaufmann, 2016). This leads to an exclusion of those who do not live up to a pre-defined normality (Krüger, 2019a). Adapting disaster risk governance means to uncover and foster potentiality, rather than defining potentials necessary to be considered a subject. Identifying marginalization and vulnerabilities is therefore not a limit but a potential for disaster risk reduction. Without regard to their ascribed potential, people and societal groups alike are to be seen as experts of their own life. An approach to disaster risk mitigation that is sensitive to vulnerability soaks up this knowledge to dismantle impeding hurdles and grant capacities to prevent vulnerabilities emerging through shocking events. It goes beyond the identification and treatment of marginalizing structures in welfare policies, but grants those capacities that are required for the prevention of ad hoc
vulnerabilities manifesting during an event. Such a process of policy-making embraces an epistemic humility and which aims to gain specific knowledge on the local level rather than to assume general knowledge.

**Turning, but not leaving the task of reducing vulnerability, to the local sphere**

Thinking of vulnerability as a contingent characteristic sits uneasy with reductionist top-down approaches designating who is vulnerable at what point. In line with a resilience approach, the endeavour of mitigating vulnerability in this form shifts to the local level. Resilience, as the ability to act and adapt in a given situation, seeks to remedy those constraints causing situational vulnerability. Since resilience is arguably based on complexity (Walker and Salt, 2006; Walker and Cooper, 2011), it is sensible to mitigate vulnerability through a complexity-based governance approach. Complexity, in turn, is based on the idea of emerging bottom-up organisation. Complex systems are not centrally structured and coordinated in a top-down fashion but emerge from a myriad of interactions of decentral actors. Economic markets and traffic are examples of this kind of system (Urry, 2005b). While interactions in complex systems are not orchestrated, they are equally not independent. Rather, they are interrelated, whereby one interaction influences that which follows it. Thus, complex systems are not only complicated in the sense that they are hard to grasp. John Urry (2005b: 3) aptly describes this kind of system as follows:

> “Such complex social interactions are likened to walking through a maze whose walls rearrange themselves as one walks through; new footsteps have to be taken in order to adjust to the walls of the maze that are adapting to each movement made through the maze” Urry (2005b: 3).

In other words, complex systems are permanently in flux, since they are “emergent dynamic and self-organizing systems” (Urry, 2005a: 237). Every action influences the likelihood of the occurrence of later events.

Vulnerability is rooted as much in complexity as in resilience. Reading vulnerability in terms of a situational lack of coping capacities requires a closer look at the context in which this deficiency manifests itself. Contexts, however, are necessarily bound to particular conditions and thus are local. Moreover, contexts are the result of concrete interactions and conditions, ranging from the local (e.g., architecture, infrastructure, support networks) to the national (e.g., welfare, diversity and disaster management policies) to the global (e.g., climate change). Changes on one level can trigger changes on the other levels. In resilience literature, this idea of interconnected mutually influencing levels is panarchy (Allen et al., 2014). Changes can then cause cascading effects that are impossible to anticipate entirely. Moreover, changes are not necessarily linear but might cause “butterfly effects”, crossing fragile tipping points (Urry, 2005a: 237).

However, this does not mean that complexity is ungovernable. Quite the opposite, governance structures need to embrace complexity and govern through rather than against it (Chandler, 2014: 40–42). Governing complexity thus means to start from acknowledging local contexts that shape interactions at the smallest scale. Mitigating situational vulnerability means taking into account the particular conditions rather than imposing general and hence necessarily reductionist presumed goals (Chandler, 2014: 38). In fact, vulnerable situations are rooted in local contexts (though also determined by trans-local factors). Local conditions, be they sociodemographic factors, urban planning or topographical issues, influence the degree of
vulnerability. The production of vulnerable groups thus also occurs alongside local attributes and specifics, since they shape vulnerable situations and mediate who is most severely affected. Therefore, vulnerable groups at one place and time as well as with regard to a certain event, do neither need to be the same in other events nor do they have to be similar in different local contexts. Opening up this possibility is both a chance to learn from previous events and take up a responsibility to change and it is a task for a much more fundamentally understood community-based disaster risk reduction.

David Chandler (2014: 35) holds that “[c]omplex life is clever, resourceful and serendipitous, able to produce solutions from the most unexpected sources”. This is certainly true in terms of knowledge production, as the effective mitigation of vulnerability requires knowledge of those particular conditions that prevent people from adapting and acting. The degree to which complex (local) life is resourceful depends on broader structures exceeding the local sphere. Having adequate means at one’s disposal to remedy locally identified constraints is then subject to broader political deliberations (see subsection 3.2). It would thus be an undue and problematic responsibilization to leave it to the local context as experts of their own circumstances. On the contrary, it is essential to understand that situational vulnerabilities emerge from a combination of local, regional, national and even global factors. Consequently, states must not withdraw from their responsibility to mitigate vulnerability but develop avenues for supporting local solutions. This facilitated bottom-up process would focus on communities without leaving the responsibility predominantly to the local sphere. It urges disaster relief authorities to devolve power rather than responsibility and to refrain from the definition of static vulnerable groups in favour of contextually defined, hence contingent, vulnerable groups.

Considering challenges and situations rather groups

Using the straight-forward applicability of the vulnerable groups approach, without reproducing its pitfalls of pathologizing and essentialising vulnerability, we suggest creating groups based on challenges to overcome rather than on sociodemographic characteristics or other individual markers.

Following June Isaacson Kailes’ CMIST\(^2\) approach (Kailes and Enders, 2007; Kailes 2015)\(^3\), we understand that operative disaster management requires concrete input on what support is needed for whom. Both the vulnerable groups approach and the vulnerable situations approach struggle to provide this information. While the former cannot do so due to its homogenising tendency to perceive vulnerability as a one-dimensional trait describing rather than producing groups, the latter rests on complex settings, with a high potential to structurally reduce vulnerability before disasters but with a limited benefit for the operational work during disasters. In contrast, Kailes argues for categories with regard to certain areas in which people are likely to need help (2015, 2020), in her approach: Communication, Maintaining Health, Independence, Support/Safety/Self-Determination and Transportation. In doing so, she presents an important shift of perspective away from a deficient individual to a specific challenge a societal entity has to overcome. Accordingly, rather than claiming that disaster management has to plan, e.g., for the elderly, which gives little indication of what this specifically means, it refers for instance to planning for persons that are in need of

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\(^2\) This stands for the five categories in which function-based needs are elaborated in by Kailes: Communication, Maintaining Health, Independence, Support/Safety/Self-Determination and Transportation.

\(^3\) It was originally designed to improve the ways in which persons with disabilities are considered in disaster management but offers much greater potential for considering diverse societies.
transportation to exit an affected area. This does, of course, need further specification, and the mentioned categories are propositions that need to be transferred and further developed. Yet, such a challenges approach allows for a better understanding of what is required or has to be provided for people to cope. In this reading, it does not matter, whether a person is temporarily immobile due to paraplegia or the lack of a car. What matters is that there are persons who are in acute need of transportation.

Against this backdrop, using a challenges approach might open up an option to substitute vulnerable groups thinking in a way that keeps its benefits while preventing a deterministic and normalizing idea of who is supposed to be vulnerable. A challenges approach is thereby to be understood as complementary to the vulnerable situations approach. It is about giving concrete support and the possibility to prepare for existing needs, therefore presenting an operationalization for the acute situation during an event. At the same time, it falls short of describing the reasons and differences behind these challenges. This is where the vulnerable situations approach steps in, by examining those societal conditions and structures that produce a particular situation. Rather than being easy to transfer into disaster management action, it scrutinizes the interplay of individual characteristics, social structures and hazards, thereby taking a closer look at the root causes. Considering particular capacities and challenges, such an approach supports the idea of an emancipatory resilience that creates rather than assumes resilience (Krüger, 2019a). Moreover, it ties operational experiences and challenges to long-term structural issues. Consequently, both perspectives need to be set in dialogue, in order to effectively reduce vulnerabilities in both a short-term (acute support) and long-term (reduction of inequalities) dimension.
Conclusion

Vulnerability today, maybe more than ever, is a highly contested concept and a similarly scrutinized social attribution. Its exact contours, its referent objects (to whom or what it is ascribed) and its subject (who is in charge to reduce vulnerabilities) are equally subject to controversies. However, all these points are mere symptoms of the underlying fundamental debate on the ontological constitution of vulnerability. Propositions oscillate between the often statically interpreted narrative of vulnerable groups (to be found, for instance, in the Hyogo Framework) and the narrative of dynamic vulnerability situations (to be found, for instance, in the Sendai Framework). As the former tends to reproduce existing disadvantages and discriminations, the latter entails a level of complexity and situational dependency which is hard to transform into practical deployment.

Against this backdrop, this paper has argued for a combination of these two approaches, with the aim of creating an understanding of vulnerability grasping it as the result of the interactions and interdependencies of individual capacities and societal structures in different fields (e.g., socioeconomic structures, physical and mental abilities, inclusionary policies), while, at the same time, allowing for its active use in disaster risk reduction. It is argued that this would encompass at least four steps: the adjustment of the ways we speak about vulnerability, a stronger linkage of disaster and social politics, an improved disaster risk governance, a local turn towards community-related ways of operationalizing vulnerability, and a shift to challenges and situations. Although each of these aspects has been discussed in academia, the debates have so far remained separate. Bringing these ideas together in an attempt to integrate a situationally aware and contingent description of vulnerable groups is meant to bridge the gap between the often-deployed approach of defining vulnerable groups and the more recent idea of vulnerable situations. This goes beyond the current understanding in disaster risk reduction policies and is thus seen as a core aim for future strategies in this field. However, this paper represents only a first step in this direction of further bringing together both narratives that often appear at least unconnected and, at times, even contradictory.

This opens up a variety of potential research areas for future work, ranging from an ongoing reflection and scrutinization of vulnerability assessments to the definition of new concepts of how to create groups that are much more appropriate to real-life needs and less the result of existing stereotypes.

Nevertheless, although we can change the ways we speak and conceptualize vulnerability, we want to emphasise that the concept of vulnerability itself cannot and should not be abolished, since being vulnerable to something is a core characteristic of life itself. There is no absolute protection against disasters. Security is a value that is, as such, limited and always entrenched in broader patterns of insecurity (Burgess, 2019). Therefore, the question of how far we are able and willing to reduce vulnerabilities is based on societal negotiation that equally draws from and points to interdependent and sometimes conflicting values. This question has been highly politicised during the pandemic and will be in any disaster. The aim of such a debate should be to allow for an appropriate and fair distribution of vulnerabilities (Grove, 2014), rather than promising the dissolution of vulnerabilities or depoliticising how disaster risk reduction takes place. Accepting the necessary existence of vulnerability in life is a resource for policymaking, since it changes how we see vulnerability. It is no longer a stigma or personal deficit of some but becomes an unevenly distributed and societally co-created characteristic.
of potentially everybody. As such, policymaking is in charge of granting fair distribution of vulnerability, by accepting both its contingency and the need to make it actionable.
Bibliography


