

The Stance of Social Perspective in the Analysis of Vulnerability

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Abstract Vulnerability is a multidimensional process in which the odds that people or groups suffer from some kind of loss or damage are very high, due to the resulted imbalance between the different dimensions that sustain individual and social life. But, why certain persons and households are more likely to manage and overcome vulnerability than others? This was the question posed by a group of social researchers as a result of the economic and social changes occurred in Latin America since the late 80s. They concluded that the core of this problem was the resources and how individuals mobilize them. Based on this, different analytical models were developed in order to understand the process whereby individuals cope with vulnerability. The objectives of these proposals have been very wide, from those interested in the quality and quantity of available resources, up to those concerned in the experiences and subjective mediations of vulnerability. In this paper, we analyze three of these models, trying to make a linkage with the different dimensions of vulnerability. We conclude that, despite the analytical advantages and possibilities they offer, there are some issues, such as the limitations to use resources and deploy strategies, the costs that people and families have to pay, and the deprivation process of resources that need further research.

Keywords Social vulnerability, Assets, Strategies, Social disadvantage, Social wellbeing

1. Introduction

Vulnerability began to become a line of study in the field of social sciences towards the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, due mainly to research undertaken in some of the Anglo-Saxon countries, but above all in Latin America, which aimed at understanding the diverse factors immersed in the economic crises and their effects on the levels of wellbeing among the population (Pizarro, 2001).

The analyses made by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and by several other researchers interested in poverty, little by little, resulted in the identification of the factors that made certain sectors of the population to be more susceptible to the economic fluctuations. This group of people later became known as “vulnerable”.

It is important to point out that, although both these issues have a common starting point, the research on vulnerability differs from that relating to poverty in the sense that the latter is focused essentially on the relationship between the income and expenditure of households, whilst the former, in addition to the economic variables, includes other assets such as human capital, family relationships,

social capital and other productive assets.

In this paper, we discuss some of the theoretical proposals that have been developed from Latin America for the study of social vulnerability. Our main interest is to analyze the dimensions and factors that take part in the creation of contexts of vulnerability as well as to understand the way in which individuals and their families use the available resources and deploy different strategies to maintain their levels of wellbeing or to offset their losses. By the end, we point out some of the advantages and limitations that these proposals have regarding the analysis of vulnerability and vulnerable groups.

2. The Dimensions of Social Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a state or situation resulting from a cumulative process in which time and other variables such as economic, social, institutional, and even cultural factors, among others, may contribute.

Vulnerability can be understood by its causes, by the effects it has over people’s life, and by the variables that intervene therein. Depending on the causes, we can divide vulnerability into two types: the primary one, which has its origins in the nature of the people themselves and involves inequities generated as a result of age, gender, or some kind of disability, whether it be physical, intellectual, or sensorial; and the socio-economic one, which has its roots in the

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inequitable distribution, or unequal access to rights, goods, and services (Uribe & Romero, 2008).

However, depending upon the scope of its effects, vulnerability may be either generic or specific (Uribe & González, 2007). Generic vulnerability is what we are all exposed to, given the different circumstances and variables that intervene in our individual and social lives. But, as long as there is no trigger agent and the risk factors remain on the horizon of possibilities, we remain generically vulnerable. In contrast, specific vulnerability is that whereby the people or groups, are truly and effectively violated, either temporarily or permanently, whether this be through unequal treatment, that they are discriminated against, or that they are socially excluded.

Vulnerability is also differentiated according to the factors and conditions involved in it. In this sense, vulnerability may be either typical or atypical. The former refers to the circumstances that are created as a result of the presence or absence of the state, the economy, and society in general, and is divided into economic vulnerability, which is directly related to the availability or lack of material and economic resources, and social vulnerability, that has to do with the ideas or beliefs that have been made collectively in relation to others and that undermine the personal dignity, the integrity and security of those that are considered as "different". Finally, atypical vulnerability is related to public policies, to judicial dispositions and the Constitution itself, which, through either action or omission, create conditions that contribute to unequal or discriminatory treatment among individuals and social groups (Uribe & González, 2007).

Moreover, for the social approach of vulnerability, the wellbeing of individuals is constructed from a constant balancing process between different dimensions. When this balance is disrupted, the odds that people or groups suffer from some kind of loss: material, personal, economic, or even moral, is exponentially increased. This is, circumstances or contexts are created which make them more vulnerable.

The principal dimensions to be considered in this approach are:

1. Natural. This refers to the conditions and natural limits that allow people's existence.
2. Physical. This alludes to the characteristics and location of human settlements as well as to the availability of minimal public services to promote the wellbeing amongst the population.
3. Economic. This is related to the distribution of the material and financial resources that allow the acquisition of goods and the satisfaction of basic needs.
4. Social. This includes the array of processes and variables that make the integration and cohesion of the group possible. When this dimension is weakened, problems of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization may occur.

5. Politics. This represents the capacity of individuals and communities to participate in the decision-making process and thus meet their needs, and is based on the extent of their autonomy, the knowledge of their rights, along with the identification and use of local resources.
6. Technical. This concerns access to institutionalized or formal education, and the availability or management of technological resources that contribute to both social and personal improvement, as well as to the redistribution of material and symbolic goods.
7. Ideological. This consists of the conceptions that individuals have regarding reality, the world, social life, the state, other people, and that become into criteria for action.
8. Cultural. This factor is made up of the norms, values, expectations and customs that sustain both individual and social action; this dimension is closely linked to the previous one.
9. Ecological. This includes the relationships that human beings establish with the environment, the way they use the natural resources, the changes they provoke in the ecosystems, and the consequences that all this have on both people and other living organisms.
10. Institutional. This depends on the role of the state and the social structures that promote the social dynamics and encompasses the level of autonomy of the public institutions, their relevance, their administration, their efficiency, and their flexibility to resolve the social demands but, above all, their capacity to include and attend the different social sectors (Gómez, 2007; Palacio, 2000).

None of these factors act in isolation, but rather, vulnerability is an accumulative process in which internal and external factors play their part in different ways (Chambers, 1989), including:

- a) Physical frailty against the risks and threats of the environment;
- b) Social fragility due to disadvantageous conditions or economic weakness, marginality, social segregation, or neglect on the part of the state;
- c) Lack of resilience due to an absence of resources or limitations to mobilize them, incapacity of response or inability to address the effects of a critical phenomenon (Cardona, 2001).

Finally, a key issue regarding the social approach of vulnerability is the identification of strategies and assets, either material, economic or symbolic, that individuals possess in order to fight against or to overcome vulnerability. The determination of these assets and strategies serves as a base, not only for the design and implementation of public policies, but also to estimate the probabilities of the individuals involved being able to compensate for their losses, or to maintain their standard of living.

3. Resources and Strategies to Address Vulnerability

In general terms, vulnerability is a state or situation in which individuals or groups have a high probability of suffering losses or damage as a result of some type of catastrophic event, whether it be natural, economic or social. In the analysis of vulnerability, there are at least three fundamental principles which must be taken into account: 1) the identification of the factors and conditions that place people or groups in a vulnerable situation, 2) the assumption that vulnerability is –above all– a social condition, and 3) the estimation of individuals' capacity regarding their resistance or resilience to address risks and threats (Cutter, Boruff & Lynn, 2003).

Specifically, for the social approach of vulnerability, the main objective is to observe the changes in the living standards of the individuals, their families and communities, resulting from variations in the economic and/or social conditions. To do this, this approach makes use of a set of variables and introduces the temporal dimension, not only so as to understand the immediate impact on the lives of the people concerned, but also as to evaluate the resources and time which are necessary to overcome the given situation.

In this section, we discuss some of the proposals that have been developed through a social approach to analyze the behaviour and procedures deployed by people and their families in situations or contexts of vulnerability.

The first one is the Asset Vulnerability Framework of Caroline Moser (1998). Its main objective is to identify what people have, instead of focusing solely on their shortcomings, which tended to be the dominating feature in former studies regarding the analysis of poverty and the unsatisfied basic needs. In this way, Moser constructs a framework of assets for the urban poor, which includes both tangible and non-tangible resources and is organized into five main categories: labor, human capital, productive assets, household relations and social capital.

- a) Labor is the most valuable factor for both the individuals and their families. In homes with high vulnerability, usually, the head of the family is charged with the support of the family, however, in times of crisis, other members of the family are also mobilized into entering the labor market, thus increasing the income and compensating for the reduction in the living standards.
- b) Human capital is related to the knowledge, abilities, customs and services available to the subjects, which enable them to enter or return to the labor market. Here, aspects such as health, education, access to and utilization of basic public services are included.
- c) Productive assets are all those material resources that can be exchanged, sold, or exploited to obtain income, including household goods, motorized vehicles, tools or equipment, and even housing or land.
- d) Household relations, similar to human capital, constitute all the intangible goods and depend upon

the composition and structure of the family and the existing cohesion between its members. The role of the family is of prime importance in understanding the way in which other resources are managed: labor, human capital, productive assets, and social relationships.

- e) Social capital is also a symbolic asset and consists of the links or networks which, based on trust and mutual assistance, people and families construct with other members of the community. This type of help may be on a short-term basis, as in the case with economic loans, or the long-term, as in the case with the exchange of basic products.

The second proposal is the approach known as the Assets-Vulnerability-Structure of Opportunities (AVEO by its Spanish acronym) created by Ruben Kaztman and Carlos Filgueira (1999), whose objective is to understand vulnerability based on what they call the “black box” of resources and family strategies. In developing their approach, the authors use the work of Moser as a base; however, unlike her, they analyze the assets possessed by individuals and their families in relation to the mobility and social integration patterns that they develop in situations of vulnerability (Kaztman, 2000).

To begin with, Kaztman and Filgueira make an analytical distinction between resources and assets. The former include all the tangible and non-tangible properties which make up the family patrimony, that is, in addition to economic income, the composition and structure of the household, material human and social capitals, the educational level, work experience, work experience, and participation in social networks. In the case of the latter, the notion of assets refers solely to that part of the resources which, as a result of mobility, allows the individuals and their families to maintain or attain the levels of wellbeing necessary for the inclusion in modern society (Kaztman, 2000).

In the same way, the authors make a second distinction between resources and capabilities, and here –once again– they part from Moser's proposal, since according to them, skills are not defined solely as human capital, but rather, that these are understood according to the chain of causal relationships and the place they occupy in achieving the objective of attaining wellbeing.

The second component of the AVEO approach is the strategies, which consist of management capabilities possessed by the individuals and their families, and which are evidenced in the behaviour and observable actions used to take advantage, transform, exchange, or increase the said assets. These strategies may be varied, since they depend on the specific methods used by people to combine the resources and attain a specific goal. “Some... may be preceded by exercises in calculation, whereby the relative benefits of the different combinations of resources controlled by individuals and households are evaluated. Others, in contrast, may just translate the habitual ways in which households react to a given situation or be a consequence of the limitations of people's reaction or reference groups when

faced with similar situations” (Katzman, 2000:35). The decision over the type and number of strategies needed to be taken is directly associated with the type and quantity of resources initially possessed.

The final element of this approach is the structure of opportunities, which is determined by the probabilities of access to the goods, services, or any necessary activity needed for the use of the resources, the acquisition of others, and the creation of more opportunities (Katzman & Filgueira, 2006). The state, society and the market are charged with providing and sustaining the structure of opportunities.

The state plays a fundamental role in the generation of opportunities. Its function may be diverse such as: organizer of the relationships between the sources of the assets, or as an employer and redistributor of the goods and services, as a direct provider of the physical and human assets, or, as an indirect supplier of economic assets and, finally, as a regulator of both society and the market (Katzman, 2000).

Society, for its part, has its principal potential as a creator of opportunities in the different forms of collective action, in both the social and family organization, through interactive networks, social capital, and primary institutions. Other types of political action, such as unions, political parties, business corporations, social movements, and other modalities of political recruitment, also have an important part to play regarding the structure of opportunities (Filgueira, 2001).

Finally, there is the market, which has the greatest potential to provide opportunities, given the influence it can have over the state and its institutions, as well as the growing need for the creation of conditions which allow it to operate efficiently, its high level of competitiveness, and its capacity to control and mobilize the variables or circumstances that interfere with its operations (Katzman & Filgueira, 1999). In spite of this, the market has failed to provide the opportunities to stimulate the democratic distribution among the different social groups, thus, the functions of the state and society itself cannot be substituted.

The third and final proposal we want to discuss is the Model of Interrelationship between Poverty, Exclusion and Social Vulnerability, by Gustavo Busso (2001, 2002). For this author, vulnerability is a “multidimensional process that flows into the risk of probability of the individual, household or community to be hurt, injured, or damaged as a result of the changes or the permanence of external or internal situations” (Busso, 2001:8). The levels of vulnerability depend, on the one hand, on the type of risk: natural or social, on its intensity, and on the degree to which the person or group is exposed to the risk, whilst on the other hand, it depends on the resources and strategies possessed by the person, family, or community to prevent, face, and minimize the effects of the said risk.

Busso adopts input from Katzman and Filgueira, that is, he addresses vulnerability from the analysis of the assets, strategies, and the structure of opportunities, however, the objective of his proposal is to understand why certain groups and sectors of society are exposed to processes that threaten

their livelihoods and, thus, reduce their levels of wellbeing. In other words, his interest lies in the understanding of the distinct forms in which vulnerability is manifested.

With regard to the assets, Busso classifies them into physical, human, and social, but adds a further two categories: financial, including savings, bank accounts, credit cards, bonds, and other formal and informal economic devices; his second additional category is that of environmental factors, including the characteristics of the ecosystem and the biosphere which influence the quality of life, the level of wellbeing, and social sustainability (Busso, 2002).

As for the strategies, this author divides them into adaptive type, that families use to adjust themselves to the loss in the level of wellbeing; defensive or offensive type, that are used to maintain (or not lose) the levels of wellbeing; and of seizing opportunities that, as its name says, helps people to identify and access the opportunities provided by their contexts. These strategies may come in the form of individual, family, or collective solutions (Busso, 2001). Regarding the structure of opportunities, Busso, as do Katzman and Filgueira, considers the state, society, and the market.

However, as has already been said, Busso attempts to go beyond the determination of resources and strategies by turning his attention to the process and factors that enable people their families to fall into or to overcome vulnerability. Thus, he elaborates a typology with seven categories of vulnerable groups: 1) wholly included, 2) median included, 3) partially included, 4a) underprivileged included, 4b) underprivileged excluded, 5) partially excluded, 6) median excluded, and 7) wholly excluded.

In this way, he attempts to explain that the relationship between poverty, exclusion and vulnerability is not causal, thus showing that there are situations whereby some individuals –without actually becoming poor- are occasionally or repeatedly excluded from social life, whether it be due to the lack of educational or employment opportunities, or in some cases, due to the fact that they are unable –or only partially able- to exercise their rights. In these cases, the levels of vulnerability may be very high. Conversely, there may be cases where individuals are on the poverty line, but have been able to develop strong social networks that can mitigate their vulnerability by, at least, helping them to face the said circumstances in a more agreeable way.

In short, for this author, vulnerability is a gray area of risk which lies somewhere between full inclusion and total exclusion. The boundaries between the different levels of vulnerability are diffuse, given the multicausal and multidimensional processes involved; nevertheless, the potential of the concept of vulnerability lies in the fact that it allows social researchers to trace and identify those individuals, families, or groups who have a lower capacity of response at the loss of their wellbeing levels, as a result of a reduced pool of assets and strategies.

4. Conclusions

The social perspective of vulnerability has become an important analytical tool in the study of socially disadvantaged individuals and groups. Among the aspects that favor this approach are, firstly the attention placed on different dimensions and factors, both material and symbolic, beyond the purely economic sphere, thus allowing for a wider panorama of the risks to which people and groups are exposed, along with their capacities to face vulnerability in their levels of wellbeing.

Secondly, we should highlight the importance that this approach gives to people's behavior, in such a way that the role of the assets and the strategies is determined by the particular ways in which people mobilize them. Paraphrasing Walzer (2004), we could say that these factors are not analyzed based on their unique peculiarities, but rather that they may only be considered as assets and strategies depending on the meanings attributed to them by each person or group.

A third advantage of this perspective is that it allows us to approach vulnerability from a variety of analytical levels: the micro-social through the behavior of individuals and families; the meso-social, by way of the behavior of institutions and social organizations, and the macro-social through the study of development patterns and the social structure (Busso, 2002). This also benefits the researchers in that they can construct a broader base with which to distinguish the type of vulnerability they are facing.

Notwithstanding the above, there are some voices that point to certain weaknesses and conceptual gaps that need further attention. One of these has to do with the type of rationality behind the behavior and actions taken by the individuals. Although Kaztman (2000) states that the concept of strategies refers to both planned actions with specific objectives, as well as habitual reactions when faced with specific situations, the truth is that the second type of strategies has been seldom explored.

Generally, individuals operate under a scheme of bounded rationality (Simon, 1957), whether it be due to inaccurate or incomplete information, because they have insufficient time to take the best decision or, even, due to technical or cognitive difficulties in facing a given situation. Moreover, our decisions are mediated by a wide variety of motives, values, and expectations, thus leading to sub-optimal decisions or unwanted effects. The latter is precisely what seems to be lacking in the analysis of the relationship between assets and the undertaken strategies.

On the other hand, as we have already said, individuals and groups in vulnerable situations often suffer from an imbalance in one or more of the dimension of social life that not only reduces their levels of wellbeing, but also their capacity to take the correct decisions. In critical situations, the range of possible actions may be further reduced, again translating into greater difficulties to manage the available resources, that is, these people have additional limitations to develop strategies, to convert their resources into assets and

thus offset their losses.

With regard to assets, Kaztman and Filgueira (1999) use them in the same way as the bourdiean category of "capitals", which involves other types of difficulties, not only related to the term polysemy, which even Bourdieu (1987) recognized, but, in addition, generating capital involves a process of generational accumulation that, in turn, implies several individual and social skills. In situations of vulnerability, the resources accumulated by any individual tend to be highly limited, both due to the tensions, risks, and threats to which he/she is exposed, along with his/her internal situation of fragility and insecurity. The variables involved in the relationship between internal and external factors become obstacles in autonomous decision making, in developing social skills, in undertaking the necessary changes to increase resources and, even more, in transforming them into assets. This contrary deprivation process of resources, either intra-generational or inter-generational, tends not to be analyzed, precisely because the starting point of these models is based on knowing what people possess rather than what they lack.

Additionally, the wellbeing provided by assets can be highly variable. For example, it has been said that labor is one of the most valuable assets and that families tend to mobilize it in times of crisis; however, for people working in the formal labor market, the loss of employment or the change in their labor status may generate higher levels of uncertainty, since the main source of income either decreases or is totally lost; meanwhile, those working in the informal labor market have -in a certain way- already developed strategies to compensate for the absence of a stable income. On the other hand, Zaffaroni (1999), referring to a research carried out regarding poor families in Chile, questions the real benefits to be gained of the household relationships, which, despite being an important network of help for the individuals, sometimes, due to the density of the bonds established between the family members, can also become an obstacle for the social integration of an individual as well as for the management of other resources in the immediate context.

Finally, there is the issue of the costs and conflicts that occur in the life of the individuals and households. As we have already stated, the productive goods, such as tools and household appliances, are assets that individuals have at hand can thus exchange, pawn, or sell, but, for those working in the informal market, the loss of these said goods may actually generate profound difficulties, since they constitute their main instruments of work (Pizarro, 2001). A further type of problem regarding work itself is, for example, that when women enter the labor market; in general, this leads to an increase in family conflicts since the other family members refuse to exempt them from their household duties, whilst, in the case of child labor, the main risk is the abandonment of the school. The issue of costs and conflicts has been approached mainly from the theoretical discussion on vulnerability, but, as Filgueira himself has said (2005), further empirical, systematic and comparative research is

needed, which would permit the gathering of information about the changes that occur on both the micro and macro levels.

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