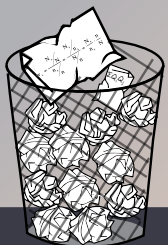
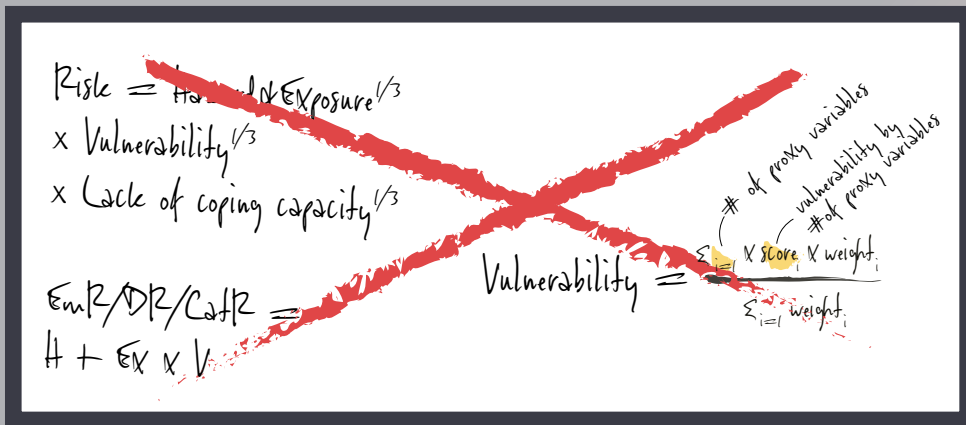


Making vulnerability analysis useful for humanitarian response

Lessons from Somalia and Ukraine

Simon Levine^{ID}, Véronique Barbelet^{ID} and Zainab Moallin

January 2025



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Abbreviations

DRR	disaster risk reduction
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IDP	internally displaced person
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
PNT	proxy-needs targeting
SAM	severe acute malnutrition
VBT	vulnerability-based targeting
WVI	World Vision International

1 Introduction

Humanitarian actors are increasingly using the measurement of some notion of vulnerability to target assistance. The rationale is an assumption that those who were already most struggling before a shock will be those most in need of assistance during the ensuing crisis. Targeting humanitarian assistance on measurements of vulnerability holds out a promise that time-consuming and repeated needs assessments, which gather unverifiable stories¹ and are subject to bias, can be replaced by building up over time databases of verifiable and objectively measurable indicators of longer-term characteristics, that can be used repeatedly in situations of recurring crisis.

In such an approach, everything appears to depend on the choice of indicators and how to weight them. There are tensions between the desire for a standardised approach that can be broadly applied across different countries and the need for indicators that are the most meaningful in specific situations; between attempts to focus on indicators that all correlate with the same outcome, e.g. food consumption, and a recognition of the advantages of a single database that can be used to address many kinds of need; and between the indicators that will be most useful for meeting different objectives, such as assessing needs, knowing who has most need, understanding how situations are changing, impact monitoring, or for making decisions about when to move away from direct assistance towards supporting people's own agency or resilience.

Since understanding vulnerabilities is difficult even in just one situation (see, for example, Kuran et al., 2020), there is an obvious temptation for international agencies to call upon a single source of global expertise to develop standard tools for vulnerability analysis across a wide range of situations. Vulnerability analysis can then be managed more straightforwardly by ensuring that the tools are followed correctly.

Early in 2024, the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI Global was approached by World Vision International (WVI) for help in developing such a tool for vulnerability analysis and monitoring. WVI was seeking to respond globally to an external audit against the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS), which found that WVI did

not systematically collect and use data on vulnerability. Marginalised groups are not consistently included in consultations and not represented in community leadership (WVI, 2024).

1 Much food security targeting uses composite indicators based on people's answers to questions such as 'how often did you go without food last month?'. Unsurprisingly, people quickly learn the most profitable – and unverifiable – answers or stories to tell. See for example the industry standards, Coates et al. (2007) and WFP (2024).

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WVI sought help to address this gap to ‘enable WV to better understand and monitor vulnerability within [its] responses’ (ibid.). The tool was to be based on its recent work on vulnerability in Somalia. HPG was asked to complement the analysis of this work with a highly contrasting case study, WVI’s Ukraine Crisis Response,² to test the possibility of a widely applicable tool.

The assignment turned into something quite different. The closer we examined what vulnerability analysis was for, the clearer it became that the ways in which vulnerability measurement was being conceived by WVI and others were only taking attention away from what vulnerability analysis was supposed to help them do – to understand vulnerability, identify marginalised groups and to ensure that their voices were being heard. This paper tells the story of why the research did not deliver a tool for measuring vulnerability, but how it found a more productive way forward instead.

WVI now wants to share this learning journey with other organisations grappling with the same problems and has asked HPG to make this study available to all.

² WVI’s Ukraine Crisis Response includes work in Ukraine itself and in neighbouring refugee-hosting countries. This study looked at the responses in Ukraine and Moldova.

2 Vulnerability analysis or ‘vulnerability-based targeting’?

The increasing interest of humanitarians in measuring vulnerability has not raised much surprise, but it should not be taken for granted. The humanitarian imperative is to help according to need, not according to possible future needs in certain eventualities. But, outside of aid jargon, the meaning of ‘vulnerability’ is quite clear: a person is vulnerable if they can *potentially* be harmed. There may be a risk of harm because they are particularly exposed to risk (e.g. living in an unsafe area, highly reliant on one unreliable income source) or because their ability to cope with challenges is weak (e.g. because of sickness or poverty). Vulnerability may indicate a need for protection and/or for addressing the root causes of people’s vulnerability (e.g. by supporting their resilience or taking a gender-transformative approach in any response), but it does not necessarily signal an acute need for urgent assistance.

The analysis of vulnerability focuses on the processes that are likely to bring harm or the processes that make people less able to protect themselves. For example, analysis may show how people living with (some) physical disabilities can suffer economic marginalisation and social isolation where buildings and public transport are designed in ways that prevent their access. Such analysis allows society to remove much of their vulnerability, e.g. by ensuring appropriate design of the built space.

In the humanitarian context, ‘vulnerability’ is not used in such a straightforward way. People in certain situations are categorised as generically vulnerable (or ‘most vulnerable’) for the purposes of prioritising assistance. The assistance might not even be directly linked to protection from the processes which caused their vulnerabilities. This is more likely to be the case where a single measure of vulnerability is derived from indicators covering several dimensions of vulnerability. (It is not clear what can be concluded from the fact that, despite not growing up in poverty, the three authors of this study would all have been eligible for family cash grants from WVI when they were young, since they more than met the criteria for categorisation as ‘most vulnerable children’.) Vulnerability analysis has come to be understood in the sector as the task of defining the classification of who counts as vulnerable and then identifying who meets those criteria. Little attention is being paid to the processes that put some people at particular risk and how to mitigate them.³ Both the terms ‘vulnerability’ and ‘analysis’ seem to be misused in this process.

Yet this understanding of vulnerability was so entrenched in the case study countries that, before looking at how vulnerability analysis can be used to improve humanitarian assistance, it is necessary first to address where the current focus of attention comes from and why it is a distraction from vulnerability analysis.

3 It is increasingly argued in some countries that people should not be seen as *being* vulnerable, but as *made* vulnerable. From this perspective, people who need wheelchairs for mobility are not inherently vulnerable: they are *made* vulnerable if they are deprived of employment or of services because offices are built in ways that do not permit wheelchair access.

Since resources are never enough to meet needs, difficult decisions on rationing or targeting have to be made. There are no simple answers. In Somalia, community-based targeting has been a standard approach for many years, but it has raised many challenges. Can aid reach the most vulnerable if aid rationing is put in the hands of those who are part of the system which has marginalised them? Apart from politicisation, there may be little transparency or objectivity to assessments, which may be carried out repeatedly by community leaders at the behest of successive aid agencies and projects (see Box 1). There is an understandable desire to find objective and objectively verifiable indicators, which would (it is hoped) reduce politicisation, increase accountability and transparency, increase the ability of agencies (including government) to share information, and reduce the need for constantly repeating the process. This requires identifying characteristics about which information can be collected quickly and which are verifiable, e.g. age, the household dependency ratio and people's physical assets. If such characteristics can correlate with some measure of wellbeing (usually income or consumption levels), they can serve as a shortcut for assessing people's normal livelihood situation. Factors which are statistically linked to low consumption are then labelled as 'vulnerabilities'.

Box 1 Vulnerability assessments in the humanitarian sector

There has been a change over the last decade in how organisations have developed vulnerability assessment methodologies. In the early 2010s, with the emergence of programming for resilience, new vulnerability assessment methodologies were developed focused on resilience, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate adaptation programming. These aimed to reduce people's vulnerability and exposure to hazards and to increase their capacities to deal with them. Such assessment methodologies were concerned with understanding vulnerability and capacity to inform programming. Some examples include:

- Christian Aid's participatory vulnerability and capacity assessments focusing on DRR, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development (Christian Aid, 2009).
- Oxfam's participatory vulnerability and capacity assessment focusing on DRR and climate change adaptation (Oxfam, 2012).
- The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s resilience policy (USAID, 2012).

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war (2011), humanitarian organisations such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have developed different approaches, using tools to identify vulnerable households for targeting purposes. These approaches tend to use vulnerability as a proxy for needs (see above), and may blur the lines between analysing vulnerability, assessing needs and identifying priority aid recipients. Some examples include:

- The Vulnerability Assessment Framework developed in Jordan to respond to the Syrian refugee situation, which is used to identify and prioritise assistance to refugee households outside camps (UNHCR, 2014; Samuel Hall and UNHCR, 2022).

- The World Food Programme (WFP)'s Essential Needs Assessments uses level of needs to define vulnerability tiers in order to inform the targeting approach (WFP, 2020).
- UNHCR's Basic Needs and Vulnerability assessment used in Sudan, which aimed to inform assistance programming through mapping vulnerabilities and needs (Voluntas Policy Advisory, 2021).
- The Vulnerability and Essential Needs Assessment (VENA) conducted by WFP, UNHCR with REACH in Uganda to help develop household profiles to better meet needs (WFP et al., 2020). The VENA includes a market accessibility component.

Our own research in Somalia and in Ukraine in 2024 highlighted that when humanitarian agencies talked about vulnerability analysis, they were following this second wave of approaches, i.e. almost entirely referring to the process of quantifying the number of vulnerability categories into which different individuals or households fell. In Somalia, this was emerging as an alternative to community-based targeting. In Ukraine, WVI used their Most Vulnerable Child mapping tool to compare the prevalence of children classified as vulnerable in different districts for the purposes of geographical targeting. (Hargrave and Bryant (2024) analyse in some detail the narratives around vulnerability in Ukraine, and the frustrations of a 'classification first' approach to analysis.)

As we use the term, these later processes do not constitute vulnerability analysis.

There is no claim that these characteristics represent a real vulnerability profile – they claim only to be statistical predictors of low consumption. They do not describe the processes that lead to people suffering from some dimension of poverty, nor do they claim to offer a complete list of vulnerabilities. They are chosen simply because they are parameters that can be collected quickly, are considered objective or verifiable, and which are most generic, i.e. are associated with poverty for many people. Poverty, or low consumption, becomes the dominant outcome considered because it too is easier to assess, is verifiable and generic, allowing for correlations to be calculated and calibrations to be made.⁴

Although this targeting approach is being called 'vulnerability-based targeting' (VBT) (WFP and Trinity College Dublin, 2022; FAO, 2024; UNHCR, 2024), it is not really based on vulnerability, but on characteristics chosen because they correlate with low consumption. Since these are really characteristics that are proxies for some degree of relative need, this approach should more accurately be called 'proxy-needs targeting' (PNT). Ironically, VBT works by ignoring vulnerabilities that are specifically related to the crisis, because it is based on the (often plausible) assumption that people's situation before the crisis is a good predictor of their situation in the crisis. In other words, it assumes that circumstances change equally for everyone in a crisis, meaning that everyone is equally vulnerable.

4 The characteristics have to be quite generic, because the correlations will usually be established using data from different populations, in different circumstances. Characteristics that may be strongly associated with wellbeing in particular circumstances may not show up in reference populations.

We do not argue that the approach should never be used; a deeper discussion on targeting is beyond the scope of this paper.⁵ Our message is simply that VBT should not be mistaken for vulnerability analysis.

There are four limitations of PNT as it's usually used, which distinguish it clearly from vulnerability analysis:

- 1. It relies on everyone being equally vulnerable to shocks**, because characteristics which correlate with wellbeing before the shock would not be useful proxies for wellbeing in the crisis itself if some people were particularly vulnerable. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic this approach would not identify people with underlying health conditions as being particularly vulnerable.
- 2. It does not assess the degree of need**, because it deliberately chooses stable characteristics to assess people's relative situation before the shock. These cannot say anything about levels of need in a crisis.
- 3. It cannot inform the design of how to offer support**, because PNT does not give information on needs – and cannot therefore indicate which needs are most urgent, nor how such support should be delivered. Where composite vulnerability scores are not disaggregated, the score does not enable targeting to be connected with the nature of the needs that different targeted households may suffer.
- 4. It largely ignores many vulnerabilities to exclusion**, including many vulnerabilities to exclusion from assistance. For example, in Somalia people from marginalised clans have weaker support networks outside their own communities, and they are often excluded from humanitarian assistance, since targeting is heavily influenced by political power. Barbelet et al. (2021) describe how aid was distributed in garrison towns in Northeast Nigeria, from which men were often excluded, but being an adult male was not on the list of vulnerability categories. In Ukraine, many people are also vulnerable just because they do not match the criteria by which aid is distributed (see Section 2.2). Of course, better vulnerability criteria could be included (though they rarely are) – but this exactly illustrates why real vulnerability analysis has to be conducted before VBT can be used to ensure inclusion.

This analysis led us to the clear conclusion that if WVI (or any other agency, governmental or non-governmental) were to ensure the inclusion of those most in need and if the voices of the marginalised were to be heard, a quasi-scientific tool for measuring vulnerabilities was barking up the wrong tree. In order to find a better way forward, we had to take a step back and address the question: what are the different purposes which vulnerability analysis can serve?

⁵ There are also underlying concerns about its effectiveness at all. Kidd et al. (2017) found that this approach to targeting social protection has huge levels of error, and is little better than random targeting. Research on targeting in Nigeria highlighted how current vulnerability-based targeting failed to identify the most vulnerable households, and that none of the targeting practices were perfect at reaching vulnerable households, including geographic targeting, community-based targeting, proxy-means targeting or categorical targeting (Merttens et al., 2024). For more on the benefits and limitations of different targeting approaches, see IFRC and Spanish Red Cross (2016), Merttens et al. (2024), Patel et al. (2017). For a deeper analysis of VBT in Somalia, see Mosel et al. (forthcoming).

Box 2 Vulnerability analysis in Somalia: the need for difficult conversations

Somalia is a good case study for looking at vulnerability in relation to crises because it is so well recognised how much vulnerability is shaped by social and political factors, and not only by wealth and income. There is a lot of information on how clan identity affects individual vulnerability, and in complex ways. Power nationally is shared unequally between clans, and this is reflected in the distribution of national resources, including aid. People from certain clans tend to have much better networks outside their communities than those from other clans; such networks are crucial in coping with many crises. The distribution of the benefits of assistance is also strongly influenced by clan identity: local leaders prioritise the needy from their own clans or sub-clans, so people who don't have clan representation among the local leadership may be excluded (Yusef et al., 2019). This can play out in complex ways in different places and so needs very detailed understanding.

All of this is recognised by agencies working in Somalia. However, this is not linked to how vulnerability is currently being discussed there. Most informants could discuss these aspects of vulnerability quite clearly, but their first answers to questions about who is vulnerable were almost entirely a list of categories, in particular internally displaced people (IDPs), women-headed households, and pregnant and lactating women.

Other discussions are dominated by VBT, which is an attempt to ration assistance by moving away from status-based targeting, where aid has automatically been given to everyone with the status of IDP – often meaning simply that they are living in an IDP site. This has fed a war-aid economy where corruption, political power and marginalisation are entwined.

WVI is limited, though, in how far it can change the situation. It does not have full freedom to apply vulnerability analysis for targeting purposes in all its work. Its aid donors often prescribe which 'categories' of people the aid should reach (e.g. IDPs), reinforcing the automatic identification of vulnerability with IDPs (that has created so many problems) or women-headed households. Marginalisation and exclusion enter the equation before an aid organisation can apply its own vulnerability lenses. The geographical targeting of aid is highly politicised, and even the aid sector's standard reference, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), is a consensus process, i.e. has to accommodate power and politics. At lower geographical levels, local authorities often direct agencies to give assistance in particular areas. Agencies may have some, but only limited, room for negotiation.

In the last year, agencies have been worrying more about vulnerability to exclusion, particularly in response to the United Nations report on aid diversion (UN, 2023). For example, attempts are being made to promote greater diversity among community leaders involved in aid targeting and delivery, and to ensure that sections of the population are not being missed. However, there are still no systematic attempts to monitor inclusion properly or to ensure that accountability mechanisms go beyond offering phone lines.

Somalia offers an interesting contrast to Ukraine in that it is such a long-standing response that humanitarian aid has shaped the very context in which it operates. Aid and aid diversion are hugely important parts of the politics and economy of Somalia, and settled ways of thinking and acting have emerged over many years. Many of the features discussed above are perhaps more openly acknowledged in Somalia, but are common to other humanitarian crises. These include huge problems of corruption and aid diversion; widespread recognition that humanitarian targeting is 'gamed'; and many layers of mistrust between the government at various levels, humanitarian agencies, community leaders and communities affected by crises.

Box 3 Vulnerability analysis in Ukraine: an outlier or the future?

A study of the Ukraine crisis response found that one of the primary causes of vulnerability was not having a characteristic that was flagged as a vulnerability. Ukraine has well-developed social protection that provides the majority of assistance that people receive. However, as with all social protection systems, it has to work by responding to a certain number of characteristics, and as with social protection systems in many countries, it takes what is called a 'life-cycle approach', targeting assistance at particular stages in people's lives (birth, pregnancy, old age, etc.). This worked well for regular social protection, but it was imperfect as a basis for targeting assistance in a crisis which created needs and vulnerabilities that were unconnected to people's life-cycle stage. Humanitarian assistance helped fill in some of the gaps, but imperfectly: plenty of people slip through the cracks between the two systems.

The humanitarian community, too, uses a number of easily identifiable characteristics to target individuals and households. The research undertaken by a group of agencies in the country has helped show that some of these characteristics were based on mistaken assumptions, and that some groups of people were being left behind. There was no reason why women-headed households were necessarily vulnerable: this common aid category imported the notion of a household head which was not appropriate in Ukraine. In fact, what made households vulnerable was not the gender of the household head, but if there was only one adult in a household responsible for more than one dependent. If that adult was a woman, the household was more likely to struggle. The left-behind were those not picked up by either system.

Ukraine may seem like an outlier for humanitarian response, but there are good reasons why it is a fertile source of learning about vulnerability (and many other issues related to humanitarian response). Whereas Somalia has developed entrenched ways of thinking over decades, a totally new context makes it easier for agencies to develop fresh thinking, unencumbered by conventional assumptions. Many staff in the humanitarian response found it easier to identify with affected populations than is common in other crises across the world. This helped staff to see nuance, and even to look for it, where in many crises there is a tendency to see crisis-affected populations in very simplified terms.

Although it may still not be common for humanitarian agencies to operate in countries where social protection is so developed, this situation is rapidly changing. More and more crisis-affected countries are developing and expanding social protection and the capacity of states and governments is rapidly transforming. It is becoming more recognised that one of the first priorities for humanitarian organisations is to understand how social protection works and its gaps, and working out how best to play a complementary role to it. This is not straightforward, for example where humanitarian agencies want to align with social protection services, but where the life-cycle approach of social protection does not match the vulnerability analysis needed for humanitarian response. These are some of the new challenges facing the humanitarian sector. Ukraine is a fertile ground for learning to prepare for this.

3 What is the point of analysing and monitoring vulnerability?

Perhaps our most useful finding from interviews with aid actors in both Somalia and Ukraine is that the main constraint to improving the quality of vulnerability analysis has been confusion about what vulnerability analysis is for. This confusion seems to have been exacerbated because vulnerability analysis is presented as a technical exercise – the starting point for engaging with staff members has rarely been the question of why they need to understand vulnerability better (see Box 4). We have set out the answers to this question below. We do not believe that there is anything new or clever in this presentation; our point is not that the answer to the question is difficult, but that the right questions need to be asked.

Box 4 The transformational potential of vulnerability analysis

There are many examples where vulnerability analysis has led to a transformation of humanitarian response and other support. However, because transformation is the outcome of a long process of learning, analysis, discussion and advocacy, it may not be seen as due to vulnerability analysis.

The famine in Somalia in 2011, caused by a combination of conflict and drought, led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Maxwell and Majid (2016) were among those to recognise that the brunt of mortality fell on clans that had been historically marginalised. In subsequent years, they and others helped the humanitarian community understand these patterns of vulnerability. Much more serious efforts to reach marginalised populations were seen in the most recent drought crisis in 2020–2022.

An ongoing process of vulnerability analysis, to better understand which children were most vulnerable to mortality from severe acute malnutrition (SAM), led to a new understanding by Valid international and others of the limitations of the traditional management of SAM in therapeutic feeding centres. As a result, an entirely new approach was developed for the community management of acute malnutrition (Valid Nutrition, n.d.). Hundreds of thousands of lives have been saved.

3.1 To address underlying causes of vulnerability

The necessary first step for addressing underlying causes is to identify and understand them. This means understanding the processes that expose people to risks of harm, or which undermine their ability to protect themselves from harm. Vulnerability analysis is thus the basis for designing and targeting interventions to support people's resilience or for DRR, and for gender-transformative

approaches to achieving gender equality. Humanitarian assistance may not be intended to address the underlying causes of vulnerability, but humanitarian interventions should be designed in ways that are coherent with efforts to address them, and must ensure that they do not exacerbate them.

3.2 To understand who may have greater needs

A good understanding of underlying vulnerabilities in different scenarios gives a reasonable first picture of who may have the greatest needs for support in different circumstances. The analysis, though, must incorporate both pre-existing vulnerabilities and an appreciation of vulnerabilities created by a new scenario or an actual crisis. Vulnerability analysis is thus a prerequisite for the more technical processes of VBT or PNT as described above, so that the most important characteristics will be assessed. This kind of analysis is not only for targeting: understanding what gives rise to greater needs and how this leads to harm is important for designing an intervention to prevent the harm.

3.3 To understand who may have specific needs

Some vulnerabilities give rise to needs that require support that is not required by most people – needs that are therefore sometimes overlooked in humanitarian responses. This kind of analysis should be inherent, for example, in child-focused or gender-responsive approaches. It should also help humanitarian agencies understand the importance of ensuring that particular medicines, such as insulin, are included in emergency health services. This kind of analysis is also needed for both the design and targeting of support.

3.4 To understand exclusion and to ensure inclusion

There are many reasons why people may not get the support they need, even when it is being made available. Barriers may include physical access constraints, e.g. if support is offered too far away for infirm people to reach; financial constraints, e.g. when people cannot afford transport to access assistance; and information barriers, e.g. if only written information is provided, different languages are spoken, or if women do not own phones and do not receive essential messages sent by texts. Access to support may also be constrained by social or political factors, such as ethnicity, or because of religious or gender norms. Exclusion may also be caused by the bureaucracy of assistance, e.g. some may be excluded because they do not have national ID cards that are required for registration.

These barriers may be caused by characteristics that do not normally create a disadvantage or vulnerability. They therefore require a distinct form of vulnerability analysis, specifically looking at inclusion and exclusion from assistance provided by both the state and other agencies. This kind of vulnerability analysis can be challenging, because there may be no pre-identified starting points for looking at patterns of vulnerability which did not exist before the crisis. It may require a much more open-ended process. Exclusion requires continuous monitoring in order to progressively discover and address access constraints, so that targeting gradually improves throughout the response.

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There is no simple process for answering all of the questions above. This, too, is important to note: vulnerability analysis is not a one-off process or technical exercise. The next chapter discusses how these various objectives can be met by using different forms of vulnerability analysis at different stages in the process of delivering support.

4 The different faces of vulnerability analysis

Chapter 3 argued that vulnerability analysis has more than one function and more than one face. However, though the focus of vulnerability analysis should change from problem analysis or needs assessment to evaluation (see Box 5), the ‘output’ of vulnerability analysis should be the same: a better understanding of the processes which create vulnerability.

This chapter outlines what we believe should be the different priorities for vulnerability analysis at different stages in the programme, and the different questions which need to be answered for each objective or at each stage (see Figure 1).

Box 5 Vulnerability analysis for resilience building or DRR

Vulnerability analysis can be more focused – and more technical – where it is done to inform attempts to directly address underlying causes of vulnerability. This objective demands a much more detailed causal analysis, often focused on a single problem, rather than an attempt to meet a range of needs. This could involve studies to inform river management to prevent flooding or detailed investigation of the underlying causes of malnutrition in a particular population. This kind of analysis will probably not carry the label of ‘vulnerability analysis’. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this further, since each problem will lead to its own approaches and methodologies.

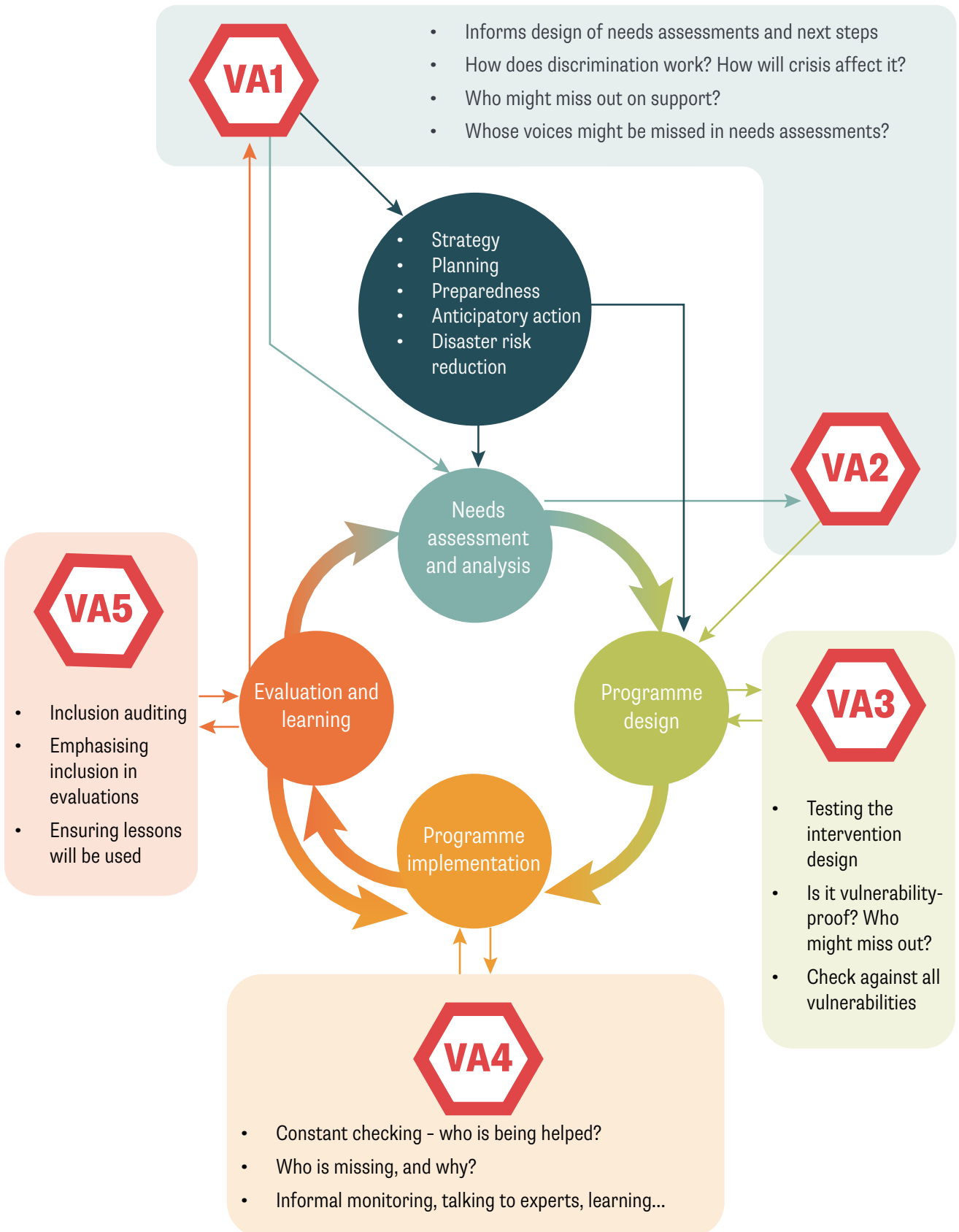
4.1 VA1: getting an initial understanding of the vulnerability landscape

Some understanding of the landscape of vulnerability is needed before any needs assessment can be carried out. Without this, agencies would not know where to focus attention, who to talk to and what to look for. Because humanitarian agencies usually work in countries where they (or other humanitarian agencies) have had a presence for several years, the basics are likely to be known already: which shocks are most likely, what the effects will be, who is likely to be most affected, what patterns of need may emerge. There are often established inter-agency platforms for discussing this.

Building on this basic understanding, a more detailed analysis can then be developed, looking more deeply at the three dimensions of vulnerability:

- Who may have greater needs and why (and thus how that harm can be prevented).
- Who may have specific needs and why (and thus how that specific harm can be prevented).
- Who may be excluded from support, and how to ensure inclusion.

Figure 1 The different forms vulnerability analysis takes at different stages in a project cycle



Note: VA = vulnerability analysis

Exclusion is often a blind spot in the design of support, and, as example of Ukraine shows (see Section 2.2), is not necessarily the result of marginalisation or deliberate discrimination. The design of needs assessment must be informed by an understanding of who may be missed, to ensure that those voices are heard and their situation understood.

This kind of vulnerability analysis can take place even before any shock occurs, in order to inform an overall strategy for likely response and presence in a country (whether the agency is international, national or governmental), for preparedness, and in the design of anticipatory action. In informing the overall strategy, this analysis is laying out the broad lines of intervention design. Since many countries suffer from recurrent crises, or ongoing shocks during protracted crises, this vulnerability analysis may also be used to inform the design of an immediate response to a sudden spike. This is probably not ideal, since an analysis prior to a shock cannot give details about what has actually occurred, but it may be a good starting point, especially in recurrent shocks. It should also be done immediately after a shock, to inform the design of any needs assessment. If a recent vulnerability analysis of the required depth took place before the shock, a fairly rapid review and refresh may be all that is required.

This analysis will be almost entirely qualitative investigation. Because vulnerability is almost always shaped by social, political and economic factors, it requires people who understand the society, and not only technical experts in health, water, food security, etc. A wide range of experts should be consulted (e.g. social workers, teachers, academics). Partner agencies who are closer to the affected populations are likely to play a critical role. Informants should not only come from inside the humanitarian bubble. (A good rule of thumb would be that if everyone consulted understands the humanitarian jargon in which the questions are posed, then too narrow a range of people has been consulted.)

Every staff member of an agency will have something to contribute, though this does not mean that any individual will have a complete picture. Agency staff, like everyone else, have their own biases, and these need to be understood. An agency should avoid making this a purely humanitarian exercise, because it needs to ensure that it has the same understanding of vulnerability across the whole of the agency.

The outputs of VA1 are:

- An appreciation of where, on whom and on what to focus attention in the needs assessment.
- A better appreciation of how existing patterns of vulnerability might influence and be influenced by any new shock.
- An understanding of processes of discrimination and marginalisation, and who might get missed out in any needs assessment or from support.

Results feed into strategic planning, the design of needs assessment and programme design.

4.2 VA2: following up on unusual patterns

In some cases an assessment might throw up unusual or unexpected patterns, e.g. if the prevalence of malnutrition or displacement are much higher in one population group than another. It is important to look for any unusual patterns of need, because an investigation is then needed to understand the underlying vulnerabilities that caused it. The shape that investigation will take will depend entirely on the question that needs to be answered. Results of this analysis feed into programme design. (This stage may not be needed but it should not be skipped just because no one looked for anomalies.)

4.3 VA3: vulnerability stress testing

Interventions will be designed to address processes and outcomes of vulnerability, but the same patterns of vulnerability will also affect how the intervention plays out. For example, gender inequality may make it impossible for women to benefit from an intervention designed specifically to give support to women. ‘Stress tests’ should constantly be run during the design process of every intervention, to imagine the different ways in which patterns of vulnerability may affect the programme. This will include how vulnerability might affect the access which different people have to support, and also how vulnerability might affect how they benefit from any support accessed. It is almost inevitable that different patterns of vulnerability will skew the benefits of any intervention away from some people. Addressing this will not necessarily involve challenging engagements with vested interests. It may be as simple as ensuring easier physical access to points of contact between support and the targeted population, or ensuring that frontline staff speak a minority language.

The results of this analysis feed into the design process to make it more ‘vulnerability-proof’.

4.4 VA4: monitoring (informal and formal)

However good the vulnerability analysis has been from VA1 to VA3, and however well the lessons learned have been incorporated during planning, it is highly unlikely that every vulnerability has been identified and understood, or that any intervention is unfolding exactly as planned. It is almost inevitable that some people will be excluded or relatively less supported. Inclusion is not something that can be ensured in the design phase: a constant process is needed to progressively improve it. Continuous monitoring is needed of what is happening, who is benefiting and who is not, how support is affecting people’s lives, and how social organisation is changing.

Inclusion can only be ensured if you are counting who is included by inclusion auditing (see Box 6). But monitoring cannot just be quantitative or survey based. It must involve conversations with people involved in the intervention and those who are not, which is why ‘understanding’ makes up two of the three steps in inclusion auditing. This should allow programme design, implementation and communications to be able to adapt as a deeper understanding of vulnerability is gained and/or

circumstances are changing. However, this depends on the degree to which an agency allows flexibility. There is little point in vulnerability analysis and inclusion auditing if an agency is rigid in following rules established at the start of a programme.

Monitoring, in this sense, is not solely the responsibility of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) staff. All staff who have contact with communities where the programme is working can and should contribute to it. VA4 depends more on fostering an attitude that every conversation is an opportunity to learn and to create spaces for sharing insights, rather than to focus on the design of information-gathering procedures.

The results of this analysis feed into the adaptation of programme implementation and/or design, in particular to improve inclusion.

4.5 VA5: as a component of evaluation

The questions asked in VA4 should inform any evaluation of the project. This will enable more understanding and knowledge to inform the design of future programmes, and will enable other programmes to learn about patterns of vulnerability and exclusion that may arise in other places and other societies.

Box 6 Understand, count, understand: inclusion auditing to know who is being reached

Data is the friend we too often ignore. Data is particularly important in helping us to see what – or who – might otherwise remain invisible. That is why those concerned with addressing gender inequality insist on sex-disaggregated data. Data can also help us monitor the inclusiveness of a response beyond gender.

To take inclusion as seriously as we take accounting, we have to audit it. That means counting who is being included in a response and who is missing. It should be done separately for each factor that could lead to marginalisation or discrimination. For example, if we know how many women are in a particular population, we can compare this with the number of women being included (in different ways) in an intervention. The numbers don't have to match. But if we find that there are fewer women included in a response, we do have to know why.

Auditing has been used in Somalia to understand the exclusion of minority clans (Thomas and Opiyo, 2021).ⁱ It can, and should, be used for many other potential factors that might cause exclusion. It will often be impossible to get precise data, for example on the number of people with a particular disability or from a particular ethnic group in a population, but precision is rarely needed. Good estimates usually tell a clear enough story.

We have to know what numbers to collect, and that means knowing as much as possible about different patterns of vulnerability, as already discussed. And we also have to know what the numbers we collect mean. For example, if there is roughly the same percentage of old people participating in a response as in the population as whole, does that signify that the intervention is inclusive? If we were running a skills training programme, we might wonder how the number was so high, but if we were supporting health care or people with disabilities, then we might expect old people to be over-represented in the intervention. Finding only the same percentage might mean that some were having some difficulty in accessing support. That is not hard to investigate: it should be enough just to chat to a few people, both those inside and those outside the intervention.

Inclusion auditing doesn't have to be difficult; there are just three steps. First, understand what might give rise to exclusion. Second, count how many people affected by the issue that you are worried about are inside and outside your intervention. Third, understand what the comparison of those two numbers mean. If some people appear to be missing out on support, make sure you know why. Inclusion auditing can be summed up like this: understand, count, understand.

ⁱ We are grateful to Claire Thomas for suggesting to us the language of auditing, which is a term and an approach more commonly associated with concern for the *internal* workings of an organisation, e.g. diversity auditing. We have extended her use of 'minority auditing', arising out of a particular exclusion concern in Somalia, to 'inclusion monitoring', to encompass other vulnerabilities.

5 How to support vulnerability analysis that delivers

Chapter 4 sketched out several faces of vulnerability analysis. We argue that the primary factor that will determine the ability of vulnerability analysis to enable an organisation to reach those most in need and to hear the voices of the marginalised is not technical, but organisational. The purpose of vulnerability analysis is not simply to learn, but to use the learning. In an organisation where learning flows into action, vulnerability analysis can thrive. Otherwise, whatever the level of technical excellence recruited, it will not serve much purpose.

Many organisations feel that the simplest way to guarantee quality is to prescribe a set of rules (standard operating procedures) that will deliver a quality output and then monitor compliance with them. The difficulties of recruiting sufficient expertise to ensure good-quality vulnerability analysis (as discussed in the Introduction) leads, then, to a tendency to rely on tools for vulnerability analysis. The quality of the tool (it is assumed) can be assured by finding a high level of expertise in one place for its global use: quality assurance at country programme level is then a simple matter (it is further assumed) of ensuring that the procedures are followed correctly in applying the tool.

This is an illusion. An appreciation of what vulnerability analysis is for and what it involves leads to the conclusion that it can't be delegated to 'a tool'.⁶ The illusion that organisations need tools for vulnerability analysis may stem from the confusion between vulnerability analysis and targeting. As Chapter 3 made clear, the purposes of vulnerability analysis are far deeper.

There are other reasons why it is not useful for individual agencies to develop such tools. It's very rare for an individual humanitarian agency (including government departments) to be acting alone. People's outcomes in a crisis are determined by a support system as a whole, far more than by the quality and targeting of any one individual project or assistance instrument. Apart from (some) governments, no other agency takes responsibility for meeting all needs. Coordination and collaboration between a suite of interventions are the key to inclusion, targeting and the overall quality of a crisis response.

Agency-branded tools that ensure standardisation across their offices in different countries do not help achieve this. Agencies need to ensure that their work fits in with – complements, coordinates with, agrees standards with – other agencies alongside whom they are working. In other words, Somalia and Ukraine each need a common approach to targeting and vulnerability analysis, but there is no reason to believe that any agency working in both Somalia and Ukraine needs to adopt a common approach across the two countries.

⁶ Tools may have some place in the single-issue, deeper causal analysis needed to address certain underlying causes of vulnerability. As seen in Box 5, this is distinct from the understanding of vulnerability that is needed for humanitarian response.

There is however a deeper reason why vulnerability analysis is not best served by enforcing compliance to a standard operating procedure. Asking staff to follow set procedures makes good vulnerability analysis almost impossible. Among staff in every agency where we engaged, there were individuals who had a very good knowledge of the societies where they were working and, if encouraged to speak informally and freely, were able to offer insightful analysis and questioning. They often welcomed the chance to discuss their thinking, which they had found limited opportunity to integrate into their work. Ensuring that staff members comply with procedures is to ensure that they do not feel encouraged to use initiative and discretion, offer suggestions, or critique unfounded assumptions.⁷ Agencies may be tempted to think that the ‘capacity-building’ of staff is the best starting point for improving the quality of analysis. We have found it to be generally true that to improve the contributions of staff to the understanding of vulnerability, what is most needed is simply encouragement.

This is our first rule for developing vulnerability analysis that delivers: support staff. One or two individuals stand out in every office as being questioning and analytical. The ‘thinkers’ in every team need to be encouraged, not controlled. It may be argued that the first rule should be that serious research on vulnerability should be undertaken and existing research should be studied, as discussed in Chapter 4 (and in particular as part of ‘VA1’). However, taking on board existing research may best be seen as one of the effects of following the first rule. The prerequisite for the findings of serious research to permeate the thinking of an organisation is that critical staff are encouraged to question – and to read.

The second rule is to support *all* staff. If an environment is created where questioning and analysis are encouraged, others will also reveal themselves to be learners. All staff should be made to understand that vulnerability analysis is a part of their job, whether they are frontline programme staff, drivers or senior managers. Anyone who engages with people in the society where support is given (even where this is not in carrying out their duties for the organisation) has a responsibility to listen and understand how the society works for different people, and to share that understanding with the organisation as a whole.

The third rule is to visibly use people’s contributions. Staff may have accepted a limited vision of their role in vulnerability analysis.⁸ Expanding their horizons and encouraging their creativity starts when they recognise why the organisation wants their insights and how they will be used.

These ‘rules’ set a framework for developing vulnerability analysis as a collective investigation, and not simply the application of a technical process. Once the framework is set, ways of supporting staff may then be needed. Staff may need support in designing processes by which they can gain an understanding of vulnerability or for inclusion auditing, but this is quite different from providing them with a list of questions to ask. Discussions with different staff members can raise their level of thinking regarding questions such as whom to consult, what kinds of challenges may arise if they put the most disadvantaged at the centre of attention (e.g. from vested interests, from self marginalisation), and what can be done to prepare in advance to face some of those challenges.

7 Levine and Pain (2024) identify an insistence on compliance as one of the 10 common traps that aid agencies fall into, resulting in interventions being implemented in ways that are inappropriate for their context.

8 This echoes Diepeveen et al. (2022)’s finding on the limitations of monitoring in Somalia.

6 Conclusion

We have argued that understanding vulnerability should always be a continuous process, gradually understanding better who is being excluded and how efforts to include the marginalised are being resisted, and making sure that understanding is used. This demands a culture of openness. Organisations and projects do not control the societies in which they work: the processes that they design rarely play out exactly as designed. There is a tendency to regard any deviation from the plan as a failure, and because people everywhere are reluctant to admit failures, this creates a tendency to hide this, even from the organisation itself. A culture must be set that encourages acceptance of what is beyond the control of projects, and a critical engagement with the way in which social processes never follow the agency's plan. This also requires accepting that all decisions involve trade-offs: there are no perfect scenarios. Such a culture can only come from the top, which places a responsibility on the most senior manager in a civil service ministry, a local government department or an international agency's country office to create that culture. In the case of international organisations, there is also a responsibility on global offices to ensure that senior management in each country are doing so.

Offices and departments may need supporting to be a part of processes that they cannot take on themselves. Many have talked about the fact that assumptions about vulnerability and targeting criteria are imposed on humanitarian agencies from above. For example, in Somalia the distribution of resources from aid is highly politicised from the IPC downwards, as was discussed above. The country offices of individual humanitarian agencies may have limited voice to engage with governments or with donors, but they have a responsibility to create a collective voice. That collective voice can be global, where the headquarters of an agency brings together the voices of all of its country offices, or national, where an organisation facilitates coordination of the voices of a large number of organisations, ensuring too that those with less voice are not ignored.

The conclusions are thus optimistic and challenging at the same time. Every organisation can take steps to improve its ability to reach the most marginalised, even if it is necessary to be realistic in accepting that nothing will ever be perfect. Progress can be made with the staff members that are already there: it is helpful to find more expertise, but progress can be made even without finding rare specialists. Progress can always start today, because vulnerability analysis is relevant at every stage in the trajectory of a programme or intervention.

In some ways, accepting that new technical skills and high-level academic research are not the necessary first steps to improving inclusion is to accept a harder truth. Change cannot be contracted out, cannot be brought in or bought: if an organisation has not yet taken vulnerability analysis seriously enough, then it has to change as an organisation. That requires leaving the comfort zone and having conversations and relationships that may at first be challenging. As in all therapeutic processes, everyone can change, but only if they truly want to. There are not currently enough external incentives for an organisation to feel it necessary to take full accountability, and thus vulnerability analysis, seriously enough. In the absence of external pressure, an organisation has to find its own inward motivations.

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