

VULNERABILITY DIMENSIONS OF GROUPS OF PERSONS IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT. LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: By taking into account the basis of service supply for certain groups, with various practical effects, the paper aims at exploring the concept of vulnerability translated into the economic and social life. In contrast to previous papers, I aimed at creating perspectives on the social life of vulnerable people, along with the processes and systems that govern their life. The methodological research lies in the deployment of the review of existing scholarly literature in this field in order to acquire a general framework to comprehend the vulnerability conceptual dimensions and experiences of vulnerable people. The main results of the paper bring a noticeable contribution to the constant struggle to improve the living standard of vulnerable people. Thus, this article represents the basis for further research, to deepen the efforts of powerful state people, to keep up with social and economic inclusion of vulnerable people, to implement appropriate strategies and policies.

JEL classification: A14, E71, P46

Key words: vulnerability, vulnerable groups, risk, resilience, literature review

1. INTRODUCTION

Vulnerability is a strong conceptual mechanism which, with several practical effects, serves as a basis for providing services for particular groups. This concept aids support groups and people who deal with important difficulties and problems.

Management and identification of vulnerability are nowadays an important characteristic of economic and social European Union systems, which are very much important even in Romania.

The vulnerability concept is presented in this paper, being transferred to the economic and social life nowadays. The study concentrates mainly on people so that we are able take into consideration the manner in which the thoughts on this notion are examined. I examined official vulnerability definitions and presented influential interpretations of the notion. I aimed at creating perspectives on the social life of vulnerable people, along with the processes and systems governing their life. It grants aid in order to better understand the impacts on vulnerable people and the theoretical amount of vulnerability.

This study illustrates the implication of vulnerability utilization in social policy and service supply. I centered my analysis on the impact of the concept of vulnerability on the manner in which those vulnerable perceive the services. We can interpret vulnerability from various perspectives. I examined the official renderings of vulnerability and the portrayal of the notion in scholarly literature.

I have gradually become interested in vulnerability, by mixing my experiences at work with academic research in order to discover more about the approaches of such groups. This preoccupation for vulnerability and idea of conducting a study in this field materialized not only through detailed exploration of literature on vulnerability, but also through examination of empirical well-being tendencies of vulnerable groups.

First of all, I often put forward the word vulnerable when the respective people are confronted with a series of extremely difficult circumstances.

The scientific research method that I deployed in the paper is observation, which involved researching theories, concepts, models and opinions issued previously in scholarly literature in the field.

This paper is structured in four parts: introduction, scholarly literature, discussions and conclusions. The core of the paper is in the second part, which covers debates about the notion of vulnerable groups and vulnerability, vulnerability components, vulnerability dimensions with reference to resilience and risk in the social and economic context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. THE NOTION OF VULNERABILITY – VULNERABLE GROUPS

According to the Social Assistance Law no. 292/2011 (art. 6, letter p), “vulnerable group designate people or families who risk to lose their capacity of satisfying their daily living needs because of illness, disability, poverty, drug or alcohol addiction or any other situations which may lead to economic and social vulnerability”.

A literature review over vulnerability advocates it to be an amorphous concept; not a single definition of vulnerability covers in its entirety its dynamicity, complexity, and multidimensionality.

Vulnerability came to academic focus in the late 80s and early 90s, where it was analysed in relation to poverty, as Jodha’s work (1988) and Chambers’s, (1995). These analyses were built on the examination of poor people and their economic situations. Chambers (1995) emphasised that the poor were concerned not only with their nowadays poverty, but also with their future one, the uncertainty which could reach its peak and potential in the future. Besides uncertainty, the poor were concerned with their social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, helplessness and lack. More exactly, vulnerability acquires two aspects: the external aspect as the exposure to risk, shocks and stress, while the internal aspect displays the scarce means to handle the obstacles that negatively affect well-being and deepen deprivation. Obstacles may take several shapes: weakness and physical deficiencies, poverty, social dependency, humiliation or physical problems (Chambers, 1989).

Implications with focus on vulnerability may represent a not so much investigated area in social policy. Scarce consideration might be surprising, taking into account that systems which aim at supporting or protecting vulnerable people affect those who are generally considered to have the moral obligation to help in their support. Many researchers faced difficulties when defining what vulnerability refers to (Appleton, 1999; Chambers, 1989; Levine et al. 2004). Where the concept is granted academic attention, there are big obvious differences in opinions and usage. A current idea of vulnerability in scholarly papers reveals a challenged intellectual field. The beliefs of people who take care of vulnerable people are sometimes excluded by the decision makers, and a burst of concern was created based on their vulnerable sides (McLaughlin, 2012; Dunn et al. 2008;

Hasler, 2004). The presumed vulnerability inherence might operate as excuse so that one does not overburden processes and social structures that are in charge of difficulties with particular groups and people (Lansdown, 1994; Hollomotz, 2011; Wishart, 2003).

Still, a small amount of sociology, economy and philosophy writers have argued that vulnerability represents the conceptual ground on which one can reorganise society in a fairer manner. In its actual form, the concern with vulnerability links ethic weight to the stress on social duty the notion carries (Goodin, 1985; Mackenzie, 2009). By underlining interdependence between people, various writers advocate for the vulnerability in academic papers as for a common-shared feature and, thus, a concept which has the potential to unify and transform, and also to represent an influential model to reorganise the relation between citizens and the state (Kittay, 1999; Butler, 2004; Beckett, 2006; Turner, 2006; Fineman, 2008). Those studies are mostly conceptual, paying limited attention to realistic problems.

Thomas et al. (2013) claims that social vulnerability comes from mechanisms of social inequality and historic examples of relations in society which function as social and structural barriers which resist change. Moreover, vulnerability is included in social relations and complexes, but it can be found at the junction between man and environment, and it needs social solutions to diminish the risks (Thomas et al. 2013).

The vulnerability pattern points at the tangible influence of disasters and the social situations that have a particular influence on the reaction of the community. The degree in which individuals are pleased with infrastructure, protection, transport and shelter depends on their revenue level, their type of job, their house standard, how they are treated etc. This vulnerability pattern attempts to discover to which extent social, economic and political relations mirror the place's importance, the type of context, the period when people live (Thomas et al. 2013).

Political and social contexts vary depending on the region. The rural area is more exposed to risks than the urban one because of the poor quality of infrastructure, demographic ageing, workforce migration, medical personnel specialization, the lack of hospital facilities etc. By taking into account the social distribution of risk in a socio-economic context, one can identify places subject to a higher risk, by improving resource distribution. Thus, the social vulnerability pattern supports the process of identifying social factors that are exposed to risk and the places where it is advisable to act in order to prevent potential disasters (Thomas et al. 2013).

Examination of vulnerabilities is reported to the ability of communities to recover after disasters, but also to the manner in which they manage their resources and the aptitude to attract the necessary funds to recover. The abilities are reflected in the natural, mental and social environment. They provide the necessary resources to face disasters and recover after them (Zakour, Gillespie, 2013.). Zakour and Gillespie (2013) underline the idea according to which abilities represent a kind of capital. Following this concept, we can talk about abilities under the shape of social capital, and it can include tangible and intangible resources in social and community networks. Social support is essential to rebuild communities after disasters. Support and social capital may take the form of family, friends or kinship support, ties with various types of social organisations, but mainly access to education (Zakour, Gillespie, 2013).

In the current legislation of Romania one can identify a multitude of words referring to vulnerable groups related to social inclusion/exclusion: socially excluded people, disadvantaged individuals, persons facing the risk of being socially excluded, marginalized people or vulnerable people. Vulnerable groups include a variety of socio-

demographic categories, as illustrated in official documents.

In the Joint memorandum in the social inclusion field (2005), in section 2.6, the following vulnerable groups are mentioned: children at high risk (poverty, vulnerability in social disaggregation processes, juvenile delinquency), teens over 18 who are not longer included in the homeless children protection system, disabled people, Roma people at high risk, the elderly at high risk and homeless people.

According to law no. 129/1998 regarding the foundation, organization and functioning of the Romanian Social Development Fund, article 2, section 1, letter C “disadvantaged groups consist of, where appropriate, poor elderly people with no family support, specific categories of sick people, homeless people, women who are victims of domestic violence, poor women, poor parents with dependent children, homeless children, poor pregnant teens and other such categories”.

According to Ordinance no. 68/2003 regarding social services, article 1, section 1, articles 23 and 25, people and families in difficulty and at risk are: “children; elderly people; disabled people; people addicted to drugs, alcohol or other toxic substances; people released from prison; single-parent families; people affected by domestic violence; victims of human trafficking; people with no income or small income; immigrants; homeless people; people infected with HIV/AIDS; chronically ill patients; people who suffer from terminal disease; other people with social needs”.

2.2. VULNERABILITY DIMENSIONS IN RELATION TO RISK AND RESILIENCE IN THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The definition of vulnerability can be stretched out if we include the notion of resistance. Vulnerability may be identified with a series of conditions that affect in a negative way individuals’ ability to prepare themselves and face disasters (Lewis 1997, 1999, Warmington 1995). The rest including Blaikie (1994), Varley (1994), Bolin and Stanford (1998) made attempts in associating this set of generic conditions with individuals’ precise features. Those features were generated by an interaction between social and economic situations individuals find themselves in, along with the categories (namely age, gender and so on). These relationship may have negative results, among others poverty or inequality, which have different expressions in different groups.

The groups which are marginalized and economically weak are usually not paramount to those possessing power. These groups are vulnerable, as their access to resources is restricted and their life resources are scarce. Moreover, these groups are considered to have low priority for government intervention. Eventually, marginalised groups have the tendency to outlook their abilities of reaction in case of shocks. Dynamic pressures refer to activities and processes that transpose the results of the main causes in a temporal setting, but also in a spatial one under uncertain conditions. Wisner et al. (2003) admit that these processes cannot induce vulnerability by themselves. However, they admit that this is a field for more extensive research. The emphasis of these dynamic pressures is useful because it helps in the identification of uncertain conditions.

Situations of uncertainty represent particular patterns where a people’s vulnerability is indicated by time and space, along with danger. Uncertain conditions depend on the initial well-being levels.

The model of access aims at explaining the vulnerability trajectory and establishment on a micro level and the variation of vulnerability among people and households. Vulnerability handles a disaster’s outcome while it unfolds, along with the role of individuals involved, its impact on them, ways of coping with it; it develops

recruitment strategies and interacts with other actors. Wisner et al. (2003) claim that households earn their living during normal periods of time, as they are conditioned by unclear conditions; whereas their economy is molded by both dominance structures and social relations. Lack of balance affects social relations, dominance structures and households per se. It initiates what Wisner et al. reckon to be a transition towards disaster. This pattern also illustrates the way to disaster and the modification of vulnerability conditions and social protection. The pattern implies that people make decisions on livelihood depending on the social, political or economic environment. The environment also includes these precaution measures which are taken in order to protect livelihood from shocks. When there appears a shock, it influences the environment in which people make decisions about livelihood, alongside the precaution measures preserving livelihood. Vulnerability is caused by the sum of all these influences' impact.

The main vulnerability causes can be demographic, economic or political processes that impact resource allotment and distribution amongst various groups of people (Cardonna, 2003). The development level is linked to vulnerability and, thus, vulnerability comes from social and economic fragility, material exposure and scarcity of resistance. The attention is driven away from the main causes of the problem unless we fully analyse the constitutional causes of vulnerability. The partial analysis makes danger in vulnerable societies to be deemed passive and non-responsive, as it requires in their development support from the outside (Prowse, 2003). It is vital to stress human rights and the manner in which they are used to react to shocks, so that we can broaden our understanding of the vulnerability process.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The occurrence of imbalance on a political, economic and social level boosts risk exposure, as it adjusts the organisation of personal and state-granted rights. Additionally, this occurrence generates extra risks generating incertitude about the future, mainly in case of fragile revenue streams that intensify shock probability upon consumption. That fact is stressed as imbalance diminishes state's capacity of supporting households and natural persons in the development of risk-free livelihood sources. Stagnating macroeconomic environmental situations result in fragile revenue streams. Adverse social and political situations generate fewer possible situations to correct occasions of shock. Consequently, the imbalance not only modifies the rights regarding the resources which affect an individual's well-being, but also shifts accessibility. Those characteristics cause operating losses in four large classes: loss in the rights' usage scope; loss in people security, referring to well-being and individual security in the long run; loss in profitable infrastructure reducing and slowing down economic growth; and loss in social capital undermining the sense of belonging.

Risks manifest themselves in shocks. Shocks have a different result over well-being: a few households report a decline in well-being, other report no change, while the rest report a mere decline in well-being. The last one is caused as households become vulnerable. The link between shock incidence and vulnerability define a process. The present study aims at defining vulnerability in terms of abilities, rights and functioning loss, if we deploy the particular instance of imbalance under the shape of a shock. Imbalance incidence in society causes functioning loss, fact clarified through two aspects. The first one is the lack of rights, while the second one is the exposure to risk; and they create vulnerability together. In this research, I aim at understanding those vulnerability elements. In doing so, the research considers vulnerability to be a process, not a mere

result.

Lack of rights and breakdown of abilities contribute to vulnerability by using paths which overlap. The primary effect is represented by the households' reduced access to rights. That reduction results in households more prone to various categories of environmental risks.

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