



## Development in Disaster-prone Places: Studies of Vulnerability

by James Lewis

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Over the past few years there has been a pronounced change in the way emergency managers, both here and overseas, conceptualise emergencies and disasters. Until recently disasters were, generally, identified with the hazard agent itself (the flood, the fire and so on) and operations were concentrated on controlling and suppressing the hazard and then restoring the physical damage that that occurred, generally infrastructure such as roads and bridges and private property such as houses. This operational approach was directly reflected in broader policy and program considerations. Increasingly this view that emergencies are nothing more than the hazard agent and the physical loss is being challenged by a perspective that puts greater emphasis on community impacts, psycho-social losses, damage to amenities and opportunities. Broadly disasters are seen now as consequences of impacts rather than the cause or the agent of impact. With this change of perspective—and it is clear that some rearguard action is being played out against it—comes a concomitant need to better understand communities at risk and this in turn requires an assessment of the resilience and vulnerabilities of those communities.

James Lewis' book is therefore timely. It is not the first of its kind to give weight to vulnerability analysis, Peter Winchester, Ken Hewitt, Terry Cannon and Ian Burton among others, have all written on this subject. But another book on the subject, particularly where it includes case studies, lends weight to the argument that we need to better understand the individual and social causes of risk if we are to effectively reduce risk potential and to develop arrangements and

programs that support the community if disasters do occur.

Lewis' book is clearly written and easy to read. In the earlier chapters he reviews definitions of vulnerability and goes on to indicate that there are different experiences of vulnerability which include social, economic and environmental vulnerability. This sort of distinction is useful, not simply conceptually in allowing us to grasp essential elements of vulnerability, but also in helping us segment the area so that programs can be developed which reduce vulnerability. The danger with this sort of distinction is that the borders of each of the identified will be taken as fixed when vulnerability in social, economic, environmental or others terms probably derives in part from underlying structures of societies and nations (even structures that may exist internationally or globally) that at a profound level are inextricably linked.

Lewis then goes on to examine some causes of vulnerability such as political conflict or economic exploitation and in this section he identifies and discusses some of the underlying processes that put certain groups or communities at risk. In the final sections of his book, and after discussion of some case studies, Lewis addresses issues of vulnerability and development. Again, this approach is not new. Others have argued that development (by which they usually mean economic development along the lines of western industrial societies—whether or not this is development is another argument) is a prerequisite for community empowerment, distribution of resources equitably and to those in greatest need, sustainable environmental management and the generation of robust, democratic political systems that allow for opportunity based on merit. But again this argument is well worth restating because it is not clear, despite all our efforts, that risk potential across the globe, including first world nations and differently developed nations, is diminishing or that the sum of human loss and suffering is being contained.

The most interesting part of his book is the third section where he addresses developmental issues such as equitable practice, decentralisation of services, accessibility to services and sustainability of systems. These are useful and challenging debates.

One criticism I have of his book is his propensity to put disaster management in the context of environmental management with an inclination to interpret disasters as natural disasters, with the locus of hazard agent initiation in the bio-physical realm, when I feel there are strata below this, political and economic even perhaps genetic, which are deeper determinants of risk. His

discussion is focussed and practical and while he does not break new ground he does re-state the case for vulnerability assessment, community and social analysis and a developmental focus clearly and concisely.

A useful book. Discussion of those factors or systems which promote resilience in communities would have been a relevant complement to vulnerability, but resilience assessment is likely to be the next step towards our better understanding of disasters. Most analyses of community vulnerability by European, Australasian or North American writers focus on third world countries. Perhaps because the levels of risk are heightened there in comparison with the writers' own countries, possibly because the causes and consequences of risk and vulnerability are thrown into stronger relief. But perhaps because we are unintentionally unwilling to critically examine our own societies with the same incisiveness and rigour that we apply to other societies. In our countries there may be fewer people at such great risk as in third world countries, but the underlying causes of vulnerability are likely to be the same. Many writers may perhaps be adopting a conservative position that does not challenge the context in which they live.

It is heartening to see Lewis include as one of his case studies the impact of environmental, social and technological changes on the vulnerability of Chiswell, a village in Dorset. He argues that technological or structural responses to protecting Chiswell from encroachment by the sea have not been successful and that any approach needs to be ecological, linking the vulnerability of the local community, through the mediating pathways of administrative process to the broader social and political environment.

Finally he describes vulnerability (p14) as '...not static; vulnerability is dynamic, evolutionary and accretive'. This is a useful reminder that what we are dealing with in vulnerability is a complex phenomenon that lies at the centre of effective emergency management.

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