

How can social vulnerability be measured : a work in progress

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- 1. Why measure social vulnerability ?
- 2. How ? – Objective indicators
- 3. How ? – Subjective indicators
- 4. Usefulness for social debate and policy

1. Why measure social vulnerability ?

- **Definition :**

“The exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in coping with them. Vulnerability thus has two sides:

- *an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which an individual or household is subject;*
- *and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss”*

(Chambers, 1989)

- **Various indicators of well-being and quality of life** : useful but indirect information
 - UNPD : Human Development Indices
 - ILO : Decent Work Indicators
 - OECD : Social Indicators
 - European Union : Indicators of Social Cohesion

- **Problems** :

- static or dynamic measure ?

- objective or subjective measure ?

2. How to measure : **objective indicators**

2.1. Lifecycle and intergenerational transmission of vulnerability

“Taking the analysis of persistence of income, poverty and mobility of earnings between generations together suggests that more unequal countries are prone to developing an ‘underclass’ who are poor themselves for long periods and so are their children”

(OECD, 2008b)

- Example : Healthy life expectancy

“the equivalent number of years in full health that a newborn can expect to live based on current rates of ill-health and mortality”

(Eurofound)

Changing risks and vulnerabilities across the life-cycle

Early years 0-4 (extract)

- ❑ Poor maternal and early nutrition leading to stunted growth and other life-long negative health impacts
- ❑ Poor cognitive development if early care and stimulation inadequate, with lifelong impact
- ❑ Acute vulnerability to disease and infection/ poor access to health services
- ❑ Exposure to hazardous environments relating to poor housing and/or parents' work .../...

(Walker, 2009)

2.2. Shocks, resilience and persistence

- Poverty

Examples :

- Persistent at-risk of poverty rate:

“share of persons with a disposable income below 60% of the national median income in the current year and in at least two of the preceding three years”

(European Union)

- Adequacy of benefits of last resort :

“Ratio : net income solely on social assistance for sole parents with two children / median equivalent household income”

(OECD)

- **Unemployment** :

Examples:

- Vulnerability :

“the probability of becoming unemployed over a given period (generally one year) for those who are employed”

- Employability :

“the probability of obtaining employment over a given period (generally one year) for those who are unemployed”

- Indicator of persistent unemployment :

“the percentage of the long-term unemployed (generally over one year)”

- Risk of recurring unemployment :

“number and total duration of unemployment periods over a given period (three or five years, for example)”

- **Debt**

Examples :

- *Ratio : household debt / disposable income*
- *Ratio : household debt / net assets*
- *Ratio : debt repayment (interest and principal) / disposable income*

(OECD)

- **Further research :**

- public services and means to cope**

- Access to continuing education and training
- Efficacy of public employment services in accompanying the unemployed and aid in professional reintegration
- Social protection system : means to face negative shocks and to avoid being confined to poverty

3. How to measure : **subjective indicators**

- **Work and employment**

- **Likelihood of losing the job :**

“percentage of employed people who think it is ‘very likely’ that they will lose their job in the next six months”

- **Expected personal job situation :**

“percent of people expecting a ‘better’, ‘same’ or ‘worse’ personal job situation in the year to come”

(Eurofound)

- **Health**

Work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions :

“share of people who ‘strongly agree’ or ‘agree’ to work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions”

(Eurofound)

- **Financial situation**

- Expected financial situation of household :

“percent of people expecting a ‘better’, ‘same’ or ‘worse’ financial situation for their household in the year to come”

- Support from family members :

“percentage of people aged 18 and over who receive the help of a family member in at least three out of four situations”

(Eurofound)

4. Usefulness for social debate and policy

- **Methodological standards**

- clear and accepted normative interpretation,
- robust and statistically validated,
- responsive to policy interventions but not subject to manipulation,
- balanced across different dimensions,
- mutually consistent,
- transparent and accessible to the citizens.

(Atkinson, 2005)

- **Social costs**

- Risks of poverty, unemployment, excessive debt, and health hazards : often cumulative.
- Long-term processes : lock their victims into traps of precariousness, dependence and unemployment.
- High social costs both for these people and for the society that must face the tension and conflicts resulting from a degradation of social ties.

- **Economic costs**

The degradation of human capital or of capabilities destroys, often irreversibly :

- individual productive capabilities,
- the will to actively engage in economic activities
- the capacity to accept taking risks, which is a condition for a dynamic economy.

Objectives :

- minimizing exposure to shocks: avoidance and prevention;
- minimizing the transitory impact of shocks: income and consumption;
- minimizing the long-term impacts: asset depletions and downward spiral of resilience;
- encourage greater productive risk taking: capabilities and dynamic security;
- breaking the cycle of deprivation across generations.

(Sabates Wheeler, Haddad, 2005)