



### BACKGROUND NOTE

# Extreme vulnerability to global change: Anticipating crises and building an international response

**E**xtrême vulnerability refers to those countries or population groups that are on the frontline of the impacts of global change. Addressing its reduction worldwide is a first step to a sustainable future, as well as a moral responsibility for the international community. Despite the 2015-issued international frameworks dealing with the various dimensions of global change, we still lack a comprehensive approach for dealing with extreme vulnerability, as these frameworks tend to address the root causes of extreme vulnerability separately. It's time to move towards more synergy.

## 1. CONTEXT

Vulnerability to Global Change (GC) refers to the fragility of a system (e.g., a territory, society, economic sector, population group, etc.) in the face of both sudden and gradual changes of various natures, i.e. environmental, economic, social and political. The way to overcome vulnerability is generally called “adaptation” or “resilience”, the essence of these concepts being to address the root causes of vulnerability in order to be able not only to react to sudden and partly unpredictable disruptions and crises, but also to anticipate gradual changes and associated threats. This long-term perspective is crucial as there is an intertwined relationship between the impacts of GC and the leeway societies have to make sustainable development happen, e.g. when climatic events such as droughts affect farmers and crop production, which in turn results, depending on the development context, in conflicts, economic crises, human migrations, etc.

This suggests that the root causes of a society's vulnerability are not only driven by stresses that are external to this society, but also by its intrinsic features such as living conditions, societal solidarity, economic diversification, efficient institutions and policies, etc. This applies to developing countries constrained by anthropogenic challenges such as poverty, inequality, a lack of economic perspectives, uncertain capacities to cope with external stresses, and environmental challenges such as the dependence to sensitive natural resources. But it also applies to developed countries as

the increasing complexity of human systems introduces new kinds of vulnerability (e.g., socioeconomic inequity, dependence on environmentally-sensitive energy and new technologies, etc.) to the point that complexity becomes both a tool for managing risks, e.g. by diversifying resources, and a risk factor. In addition, globalisation reveals interconnections between distant systems that pave the road to cascading and collateral effects from diverse types of changes beyond the originally affected boundaries of a system, e.g. when sea level rise combined with cyclones forces poor coastal populations to relocate abroad.

These points emphasize two major conclusions. First, GC-related threats are embedded in the shaping of human systems, and obviously the ones with the most fragile basic conditions (e.g., access to safe drinking water, food supply, energy, etc.) are on the front line. Second, addressing GC requires both national solidarity mechanisms and international cooperation.

## 2. ISSUES/SOLUTIONS

Targeting extreme vulnerability reduction worldwide is a moral responsibility nationally and internationally and it could allow limiting the risk of maladaptation to GC (i.e., address the root causes of vulnerability without displacing pressures on other systems). At the international level, this justifies why creating more synergy between the 2015-issued international frameworks—on disaster risk reduction, the financing of development, Sustainable Development Goals, and climate change—is necessarily part of the solutions for the future. But how to bring about such synergy to help address the root causes of the vulnerability of societies to GC, whatever their level of development, remains a subject that is rarely debated.

This raises several challenges. First, an overarching question emerges: do we have, from national to global scales, a clear vision of how to eradicate extreme vulnerability to GC, i.e. a vision that notably encompasses the need to address the root causes of vulnerability as well as their various shapes from one context to another? Some initiatives are encouraging—the global adaptation goal framework initiated at COP21, and the Sendai framework on Disaster

Risk Reduction—but there is a need to ensure that such initiatives combine their respective efforts to effectively encompass the diversity of vulnerability drivers. For example, while the Sendai and the UNFCCC frameworks schematically tend to address, respectively, resilience to sudden events (e.g., through post-event reconstruction standards, early warning systems or insurance mechanisms to prevent economic damages of extreme events) and anticipation of the impacts of both on-set and gradual changes, their formal disconnection leaves open the question of whether the underlying mechanisms of vulnerability, such as societal solidarity, are effectively addressed (e.g., through guarantees for human rights for migrants, information sharing, financial transfers, etc.). This is a key concern as benefits are certainly to be expected from the convergence of existing national and international frameworks around a clear vision (e.g., savings, better efficiency in humanitarian interventions, improvement of living conditions worldwide, better management of internal and international migrations, etc.).

A second challenge relates to the existence of various categories of “extremely vulnerable”, whether they are countries, regions, population groups within a country, individuals, etc. And the adequacy of various frameworks, from national efforts to international cooperation, to effectively bring support to these categories of extremely vulnerable remains an important area of debate. This also refers to the question of complementarity between the existing funding tools and mechanisms.

Third, beyond calling for discussions on the most relevant institutions, stakeholders and mechanisms, addressing the root causes of vulnerability from the national to the international level also calls for the identification of the most promising sets of solutions to improve the resilience and anticipation of societies to GC. Such sets will necessarily have to include solutions of different but complementary natures (from social practices to technology, institutional measures, compensation mechanisms such as the UNFCCC Loss

and Damage mechanism), temporal scales (e.g., from natural hazard alert systems to longer-term monitoring systems of vulnerability drivers), and spatial scales (e.g., from a global adaptation goal to local communities awareness).

### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION/QUESTIONS

- Do the existing frameworks and funding mechanisms correctly address the binary conditions for eradicating extreme vulnerability, i.e. enhance both resilience to sudden crises and the anticipation of gradual changes? And what existing complementary mechanisms exist or need to be developed?
- What benefits can be expected from better linkages between national and international frameworks, especially in terms of addressing the root causes of vulnerability?
- Which categories of “extremely vulnerable”, should national and international policies prioritize? And how to ensure these targets effectively get access to this support?
- What are the most promising (sets of) solutions?

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