SECTION 7

Step 4: Dynamic pressures and underlying causes

Dynamic pressures and underlying causes have a major influence on vulnerability and capacity, either from within the community itself or from some external source. Influences can be positive or negative, and may be deeply rooted within culture, religious beliefs, politics or international trade.

7.1 Dynamic pressures

Dynamic pressures consist of social structures and processes that can influence how vulnerable members of the community are to hazards.

The structures are the people, institutions or organisations that affect the community's vulnerabilities or capacities, and the processes are the way in which they exert their influence. For example, a local government department would be a structure, while its decisions, policies or projects would be the processes. When examining the causes of vulnerability, we need to ask the questions 'Who or what influences the community?' (ie the structures) and 'How do they influence the community?' (ie the processes).

Structures and processes may act at three different levels:

- local
- national
- international

Risk-reducing activities, which are described in Section 8 and Appendix B, will operate within this context of structures and processes – and the processes may easily undermine or destroy the benefits of that activity. For example, a health project may have low impact if a local traditional healer is spreading a very different message in the community. A disaster management committee may include female members, but if culture prevents them from contributing to debate, the views and priorities of women will not be taken into account. It is therefore important to understand the nature of the structures and how the processes operate.

It should be noted that processes can be either positive or negative. For example, a government department (structure) which is under-resourced and unable to deliver a service (process) may make people more vulnerable to disaster. The same department, if well resourced and with trained staff, may do much to reduce vulnerability and build capacity.

Some examples of structures and processes and their relevance to poor communities appear in the table on the following page.

Structures, processes
and relevance to
poor communities

LEVEL	STRUCTURE (Who or what?)	PROCESS (How?)	RELEVANCE
Local	Village elders	Maintain traditions, give judgment in disputes, maintain culture and beliefs	Tradition may preserve the dominance of men and make women more vulnerable; decisions may favour the wealthy or particular livelihood groups
Local	Church	Promotes religious teachings and practices	Will influence people's attitudes to each other and may insist on observance of costly festivals
Local	Government departments	Deliver services to the community	Quality of services will affect health, education and agriculture
Local	Businesses	Employ people; may exploit or damage the environment	Salaries, working conditions, availability of natural resources
National	Military	Employs people; controls land; protects or exploits civilians	Affects safety and economic well-being
National	Justice system, including police	Makes and enforces laws	Fairness of system, law enforcement; corruption
National	Government department for environment	May permit environmental destruction, or not engage with climate change issues, within country or internationally	Poor people lose natural resources; lack of climate change adaptation will affect life and livelihoods
National	Government department of trade	May encourage cash crops or biofuels	Food availability reduced, or prices increased
International	International companies; markets for coffee, tea, cotton, metals	Set prices paid to farmers for their crops	Cash crop income may rise or fall, according to prices
International	Credit and banking system	Banks provide development grants and loans, set terms and conditions	Terms/conditions may control government policy (eg on subsidies) or spending priorities

7.2 Underlying causes

These operate at a deeper level than structures and processes, and fall into four main categories:

■ political

■ economic

■ culture, beliefs and values

■ natural environment

In some cases, the influence of the underlying causes can be tracked through a dynamic pressure. For example, a government budget decision to allocate funds to defence instead of agriculture will affect the ability of a structure (the local agriculture office) to deliver a process (programmes to help farmers). Farmer vulnerability is therefore increased. However, in other cases the underlying cause may appear to directly influence the vulnerability or capacity of the community, perhaps through a particular cultural belief or practice.

The following table gives some examples of underlying causes and how they influence vulnerability or capacity.

Underlying causes
and their influence

CATEGORY	EXAMPLE OF UNDERLYING CAUSE	EFFECT ON VULNERABILITY
Political	The governing party is guided by political factors; it decides which areas will be given relief and development funds. Systems may be corrupt and abused.	Some areas of the country may be underfunded, eg because they support an opposition party. Resources may not arrive at local level.
Economic	Big banks and governments make decisions on international loan and interest repayments. Also the government decides spending priorities and obeys international trade systems.	Affects the amount of money government has available to provide services, and the allocations of funds between departments. Also affects price paid for cash crops.
Culture, beliefs and values	People may believe that illness and unfavourable weather are caused by evil spirits that demand rituals and sacrifices. Some individuals may be valued less highly than others.	People may be unreceptive to health or agricultural advice; assets are depleted by sacrifices. Vulnerability of women and children may increase.
Natural environment	An area may have difficult geography – slopes, altitude, soil quantity/quality – or an extremely harsh climate (rain, drought or temperature).	Has an influence on the agricultural potential of an area; conditions may further deteriorate through climate change and environmental degradation.

7.3 Assessing dynamic pressures and underlying causes

This is done by conducting interviews with key informants, often on a one-to-one basis or in a small group (as introduced in Section 4.3). Questions are designed to probe the particular dynamic pressures and underlying causes affecting a community. The following table gives examples of the people who could be approached, and some of the questions which could be asked. Additional questions will be needed according to the context.

Key informants

PERSON	SAMPLE QUESTIONS	INFORMATION GAINED
Doctor or health worker	What are the most common disease problems? Which ones increase during disasters, and why? What do people believe causes illness, and where do they go first for help when someone gets sick?	Health issues which may make some people more vulnerable to particular hazards. Popular beliefs about causes of illness, and people who have influence over health.
Government official	What policies/plans does the government have to prepare for or respond to disaster? What is the priority for the government: pre-disaster work or post-disaster work?	People may be more/less vulnerable because of presence or absence of government disaster management plans/funds. May suggest the need for advocacy towards more DRR (pre-disaster) work.
Pastor or other religious leader	How do people's religious beliefs influence behaviour? How do members of the religious community support each other in disaster?	Very fatalistic approach may cause people to be less receptive to DRR. May reveal a vulnerability to address or a capacity to develop.
Village leader	What extra pressures or duties come upon leaders in times of crisis? Who are the most vulnerable in times of disaster? What special assistance is provided? Who or what is most in need of protection from hazards?	May give clues about quality of leadership in times of crisis. May indicate an awareness or lack of awareness of the needs of women and other vulnerable groups. Indicates who/what is valued most.
School teacher	What priority do people give to education for their children (boys/girls)? How does the school educate about disasters? Is the school used in times of crisis?	Helps understand cultural value given to education and relative value given to boys/girls. May reveal a need for advocacy for curriculum change. Capacity of school as a temporary shelter in crisis.

Summarising results

Information collected from the interviews and from focus groups can be summarised in a four-column table.

Summary of
information
collected

STRUCTURE	POSITIVE PROCESS	NEGATIVE PROCESS	UNDERLYING CAUSE
Village elders	Settle minor disputes and maintain harmony in community	Dominated by men and mainly look after male interests, neglecting those of women	A culture of male dominance and control
Village school	Provides education	Curriculum does not include anything on disasters and how to cope with them	Government sets the curriculum and the budget for education
Farmers' cooperative	Enables farmers to buy seed and fertiliser at cheaper prices	Farmers may be tied to one particular cash crop (eg cotton, tobacco)	Price received by farmer is controlled internationally
Local office of government agricultural department	Officer provides training and lower-priced agricultural equipment and resources	Officer not providing training as no transport to rural areas; equipment and resources not available	Government does not prioritise agriculture in national budget; funding bias in areas that support the ruling party

The information collected from key informants can be cross-checked with the information from focus groups. For example, a focus group discussion may reveal that there is a lack of services from a particular government department. An interview with the appropriate government official will provide an opportunity to find out why this is the case. The problem may be found in one of several areas, including:

- lack of government resources to provide the service

- lack of practical skills in project implementation among project staff

- lack of awareness among community members of the service available or how to access it.

At the action planning stage, this dynamic pressure will have to be addressed. Activities might include:

- campaigning for increased allocation or release of government resources

- including government staff in training programmes

- raising awareness of service entitlement in the community.

The interviews may reveal that government has very few policies and plans in disaster management. In this case, lobbying at central government level may be the most appropriate action (see Section 8.7).

Advocacy opportunities may open up naturally as the action plan is developed (Section 8) but for long-term, sustainable gains, it is useful to develop an advocacy strategy, updated every six months. This is more likely to bring progress on advocacy issues of significance to the community. Ideally, the strategy should be drawn up with the community and owned by them.

7.4 Challenging structures and processes

In many cases, the vulnerability of poor people is clearly related to specific unjust policies or cultural practices. It may be possible to reduce vulnerability, but only by challenging the specific policy or practice which is at the root of the problem. The following short case studies give examples of processes that have been challenged and changed, the first in India, the second in Malawi.

Social structures in Bihar, north India

In a group of highly flood-prone villages, the PADR process highlighted the strength of the caste system and the greater vulnerability of those born into a lower social group. The caste structure ensured that the rich, high-caste people owned the safe high land and the poorer, low-caste people occupied the high-risk, low land. In time of flood, the rules of the culture were still enforced and lower castes were denied access to the property of the high-caste landlords. The only land available was the raised main roads and the river embankments. Structure, process and underlying cultural divisions were major contributors to vulnerability.

In this particular case, an Indian NGO (Delhi-based Discipleship Centre) developed an action plan with the community and helped the lower-caste groups in a process of negotiation with the higher-caste landlords. They were able to gain permission for the construction of a raised pathway across the low land towards the comparative safety of the embankment. In return, the landowners were able to bring handcarts closer to their mango plantations, and so gain an easier market for their produce. Relationships between castes have subsequently improved.

Children practising a flood evacuaton across a raised escape route.

Caroline Irby / Tearfund

Business structures and processes in Malawi

The Limbe Leaf Company constructed a dam on the community's land to enable tobacco production, but it then prevented anyone else from using the water. Under drought conditions, a large water supply was present, but no one, apart from those connected with the farm, was able to access that water. Approximately 160 people in four target communities were trained in a rights-based approach to development. They received advocacy training which helped them to mobilise themselves to lobby the company, seeking the right of access to the water. After much lobbying, the community gained permission from both the company and the local authority to use the dam water and part of the disputed land for crop irrigation.