Session 8:
The vulnerability context

Summary

Purpose
The external environment affects different households and different people differently. This session deepens understanding of concepts introduced in earlier sessions including differentiation, relative vulnerability and resilience; change over time, and adaptive and coping strategies. Understanding the vulnerability context is fundamental to being able to design interventions that have a lasting, positive effect on household livelihood security.

By the end of the session, participants will be able to:

• describe various shocks and stresses, and how they affect livelihoods
• identify and describe aspects of relative vulnerability and resilience
• explain the dynamic of ‘change over time’ and its effects on vulnerability and resilience
• differentiate between ‘coping’ and ‘adaptive’ strategies.

Activity overview
This session consists of three linked activities:

• In Activity 1 participants assess the vulnerability of a case study household.
• In Activity 2 participants project the vulnerability of the same case study household in five years’ time.
• In Activity 3 participants look at the potential impact of HIV/AIDS on the case study household’s asset base.

Session components and time required
The ‘key ideas’ section introduces ideas and debates about the vulnerability context. This can be photocopied and handed out at the end of the session. The preparation section alerts the trainer to what he or she will need to do before running the session. The facilitation section is a step-by-step session plan. The activity guides are designed to be photocopied and handed out to participants. The session requires the use of two household case studies.

This session will take about 4 hours 20 minutes.
The previous session examined the external environment to identify different external influences and the ways in which they affect the households' assets, activities and capabilities. This session looks at the concept of vulnerability. Analysing the range of factors that threaten household livelihood security gives a better understanding of the overall vulnerability context and the specific risks that people must manage.

This session examines how people adjust their livelihood strategies and develop coping and adaptive strategies in response to external shocks and stresses. Those households with the smallest ability to adapt are most at risk. For development interventions to increase livelihood sustainability, they must identify and minimise key risks and hazards. At the same time they must maximise opportunities that build the flexibility and adaptability of the household to manage change.

### Concepts and definitions

**Shocks**

Shocks are sudden events that impact on livelihood security. There are many different types of shock. They include:

- the untimely death of an economically active household member due to an occupational hazard, an illness like AIDS or a traffic accident
- a fire that destroys grazing and crops
- outbreaks of infectious diseases such as foot-and-mouth which affect pigs, cattle, sheep and goats
- floods
- political violence and instability
- theft.

**Stresses**

Stresses are long-term trends that undermine livelihood potential. These include inadequate public services, poor transport, bad communications, inferior education and inadequate health systems. Other stresses include a steady decline in the quantity and quality of stocks of natural resources, climate change, political instability and national or regional economic decline that negatively impact on household livelihoods. Some stresses stem directly from within the household and may include frequent illness, alcoholism, and violent or disruptive behaviour of a household member.
Vulnerability

Robert Chambers’ defines vulnerability as:

defencelessness, insecurity and exposure to risk, shocks and stress... and difficulty in coping with them. Vulnerability 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 with damaging loss.

There are different viewpoints on the extent to which people can control and manage the factors that contribute to vulnerability. For example:

People’s livelihoods and the wider availability of assets are fundamentally affected by critical trends as well as by shocks, and seasonality – over which they have limited or no control.

Other practitioners strongly disagree with the way this view makes people seem powerless. They say that people do have some control because they can prepare for and react to the factors that contribute to the vulnerability context. For example, if people understand and plan for drought and seasonal variability, they can modify the activities that might be affected. They might use drought-resistant crop varieties or methods which save water. Likewise, if people understand the source of external threats, shocks and stresses, they can decide to do something to remove the threat.

Vulnerability context

Assessing the local vulnerability context is a key part of livelihoods analysis. The poor are constantly insecure but there are certain factors and trends that can make their insecurity much deeper. Vulnerability assessment involves an analysis of factors and long-term trends. Many of these factors come from several levels away from the immediate environment. These include factors such as:

- climate change
- seasonal variability
- drought and floods
- epidemics
- political conflict
- tenure insecurity
- a government macroeconomic policy that promotes retrenchment, inflates consumer prices and devalues the currency
- conservation policy that restricts access to key resources and livelihood opportunities.
Others are much closer to home and may include decisions by district government, by members of political factions in a community that are fighting, or by the simple repair of a road.

**Understanding history**

Assessing the vulnerability context also involves an understanding of history. History can have positive or negative effects. A long legacy of poverty, deprivation or conflict in a particular area can contribute to long-term vulnerability. The film ‘Legacies’ which is set in Nkandla, South Africa highlights how long-standing political conflict affects ordinary people’s lives.

More positively, history can teach how others have overcome similar obstacles. It can show that life in a particular place was once different and perhaps better. This can encourage efforts to change things in ways that reduce vulnerability and increase livelihood security.

People are vulnerable when they do not have the resources or defences to cope with change. When the range of livelihood options, assets and risk-reducing activities available to people is reduced, their vulnerability increases.

Households are not all equally vulnerable to the same shock or stress. Poorer households may be forced to sell important assets like cattle early on to cope with a shock. Better-off households are likely to have more resources to fall back on before they are forced to sell major assets. Households also respond to shocks by changing their activities. In general, shocks and stresses widen the gap between better-off and poorer households. This contributes to social instability which may take the form of stock or crop theft.

**Resilience**

Rural people are portrayed as passive victims of hazards such as drought, famine and political instability too often. Not everyone who is poor is equally vulnerable. Resilience is the flip side of vulnerability. We need to understand how people anticipate, cope with and resist and recover from natural hazards and stressful trends. A clear objective of livelihoods planning is to strengthen existing areas of resilience.

**Hazard**

A bad thing that can happen, for example a shock or a stress.

**Risk**

The likelihood that bad things will happen at all.
Susceptibility

The likelihood that bad things – shocks and stresses – will affect a person or a household.

Coping strategies

Households develop short-term responses to specific shocks known as coping strategies. These are ‘next best’ efforts to make do in a difficult situation with the hope that the household can return to normal activities and their normal livelihoods strategy.

For example, households may cope with drought by selling livestock, depending on donor relief or working on public works programmes. Another coping strategy may be to stop planting drought-prone hybrid seeds in poor seasons and going back to planting more drought-resistant local seed varieties.

After a shock, households will rely more heavily on support from friends or family. For example, a family may try to cope with the death of an economically active household member by borrowing more heavily from relatives and neighbours who are part of their social network.

Adaptive strategies

These are long-term changes in behaviour and practice in response to continuing stresses. They are the responses of people to their analysis of risk. People may respond to climate change by changing their agricultural practices or using new technologies. For example, they might start rainwater harvesting or they may try to diversify their livelihood activities and focus on those less affected by natural hazards. Certain family members may migrate to another place. The extent to which people can adapt usually reflects their access to and ability to use different types of assets. In areas where there are very few assets or people lack the capacity to utilise them, vulnerability will be high.

HIV/AIDS and coping strategies

HIV/AIDS is one of the main factors contributing to household vulnerability in southern Africa. Research reviewed by UNAIDS investigating how families cope with the impacts of HIV/AIDS shows that households have a three-stage response.

In the first phase, healthy members of the household may try to deal with sickness or death of a partner or parent by looking for paid work. This may
Learning about livelihoods involve moving to a city in search of economic opportunities. Because this means the household has less labour at home, people may shift to growing lower maintenance food crops that are often less nutritious. They will be forced to draw on savings and sell livestock, although households with draught animals usually try to retain them at all costs. At the same time, the household will ‘call in’ any outstanding obligations from extended family and other members of the community. This may involve following up on unpaid lobola, roora or bridewealth. Households will also consume less and spend less on education and non-essential health care. They may be forced to withdraw children from school because their labour is needed at home.

If these measures fail to help, households enter the second stage where they resort to more desperate coping measures. They are forced to sell off key assets including tools, draught animals and even land. They may be forced into borrowing from moneylenders at very high rates of interest. They spend even less on health and education and further reduce the amount of land they cultivate.

Once the household has been forced to sell off its key assets, the likelihood of it entering the third stage of destitution is high. In this phase, surviving household members come to depend on charity. The household may be forced to break up as members try to fend for themselves – often through distress migration to other areas.

Communities have responded with a number of support measures that contribute to household coping capabilities. These include the formation of social support groups, local savings and credit associations, providing patient and child care, and helping in each other’s fields and gardens.

Communities have also responded by adapting certain social and cultural norms. There have been cases of local level tenure reform where people have moved to protect the property rights of widows and orphaned children. Many communities have moved to shorten the traditional mourning periods and change funeral practices which place heavy financial burdens on the families of the deceased.

**Measuring vulnerability**

Can vulnerability be measured? It is difficult to try to compress complex household, gender and information specific to a particular place into broader, blunter and more generalised statements of vulnerability. However, there are a number of initiatives in southern Africa trying to map vulnerability. These include an in-depth vulnerability analysis in Mozambique involving classifying the country into different food production systems. Informa-
tion on flood and drought risk, land use and market access, health and nutrition profiles will be added to this analysis. In Lesotho, seasonal vulnerability studies have been carried out that focus on food availability, food trends in various parts of the country and sources of income from migrant remittances.

The most common approaches to measuring vulnerability include developing specific indicators, household vulnerability profiles and projections of resilience to shocks and stresses. It is possible to look at how vulnerable a household is compared to others in one local community, or to compare communities with other communities. The focus in this book is on understanding how people define vulnerability and resilience for themselves, and what they think will make their livelihoods more secure.

**Monitoring tools**

A variety of tools have been developed to monitor risk and predict vulnerability. These include nutritional scoring systems for measuring vulnerability to famine and systems that estimate food stocks by collecting data on land ploughed, rainfall totals, changes in livestock weight and grazing conditions.

In Zambia, a composite index of vulnerability has been developed that examines crop risk, market access and measures livestock, fish and staple food reserves with the objective of predicting how many households have less than one month’s food stocks.

Other systems try to assess vulnerability by comparing drought risk, the depth of the household entitlement base and social and political insecurity. Vulnerability assessments are also drawing on new technology like geographical information systems (GIS) for mapping changes in vegetation and working out how much of the country is planted to crops and how much to cash crops.

All these approaches face problems when they try to generalise about vulnerability and household resilience on the basis of once-off local studies that are often descriptive. This information base must be continually updated and improved so that trends over time can be measured.

**Conclusion**

Vulnerability first needs to be understood at the household level. Livelihoods analysis helps identify the kind of households which are most at risk. This information can be fed into larger systems. However, the more generalised the information becomes, the less accurate and useful it will be. We
need to go further than simply measuring vulnerability. We need to under-
stand the processes, events and underlying causes of vulnerability. We need
improved forecasts of risk and we need to take practical measures to assist
households to diversify their livelihoods strategies and draw on other assets.

Endnotes for Session 8
1 Chambers 1989.
2 DFID sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets.

References and further reading for Session 8
London: Routledge.
DFID (Department for International Development). Sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets. Available from the
livelihoods learning platform www.livelihoods.org
Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation.
Mutangadura, G, Mukurazita, D & Jackson, H. 1999. A review of household and community responses to the
HIV/AIDS epidemic in the rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. Geneva: UNAIDS.
Ramachandran, M & Eastman, J. No date. Applications of GIS to vulnerability mapping: A West African food
security case study. Clark Labs for Cartographic Technology and Geographic Analysis.
www.clarklabs.org/10applic/risk/chapter3/chap3.htm
Vogel, C. 1998. Vulnerability and global environmental change. LUCC Newsletter, 3. Land Use and Land
Cover Change project. www.uni-bonn.de/ihdp/lucc/publications/luccnews/news3/coleen.html
Getting started

Before you run this session, you will need to:

• read through the ‘key ideas’ section of this session and make sure you understand the different definitions and the issues around the vulnerability context

• make sure you know what the session objectives are (from the summary) and work through the facilitation session to prepare yourself

• read through the three activity guides

• choose two household case studies – this session was prepared with the filmed case studies ‘Legacies’ and ‘Floods’ in mind, but you can choose cases from Chapter 4 or use cases you have prepared yourself.

Materials required

Flipcharts, photocopies (specified below), pens for writing on flipcharts and material to attach flipcharts to the wall. If you use the films, you will need a working video machine and television set.

Preparing the materials

1. Write the learning objectives (from the summary) and the session outline on a flipchart.

2. Write the definition of vulnerability on page 157 on a flipchart.

3. Prepare the household case studies you have chosen. This session has been designed for use around the filmed case studies ‘Floods’ and ‘Legacies’ on the videocassette. If you use these case studies, make sure the video machine and television set are working and that the videotape is cued to start at the first film. If you decide to use case studies from Chapter 4, photocopy enough copies for group work. If you decide to use your own case studies, prepare these for photocopying and make enough copies for group work.

4. Make enough copies of the three activity guides to hand out to every participant.

5. Prepare a short presentation on the vulnerability context based on the content of the ‘key ideas’ section, covering the concepts of shocks, stresses, vulnerability, resilience, coping and adaptive strategies.

6. Prepare a few points on the impact of HIV/AIDS from the ‘key ideas’ section of Session 7 or other sources.

7. Make enough copies of the ‘key ideas’ section to hand out to every participant at the end.
Step 1. Session introduction

1. Introduce the session learning objectives and activities, using the flipcharts you have prepared.

2. Ask participants to speak in pairs to identify key aspects of the concept of vulnerability and write them down.

3. Give each pair a turn to contribute a new idea and write these on a flipchart or on cards. Look at what the ideas have in common.

4. Introduce the definition of vulnerability from the key ideas section and discuss the extent to which the points that participants identified fit with the definition.

Step 2. Activity 1: Examining the household vulnerability context

Purpose: To identify the different factors that make households vulnerable and how these affect their assets, capabilities and activities and to highlight the different ways households respond.

1. Introduce the case study to illustrate the concept of vulnerability: the ‘Legacies’ or ‘Floods’ film on the videocassette, or a printed case study. Give some background on the case study from Chapter 4.

2. Ask people to make notes as they watch the film or read the case study. Write a number of theme areas on a flipchart and ask participants to make notes on the following (you may want to divide the questions between groups so as to save time):

   - The household’s assets, capabilities and activities and how these combine to form their livelihood strategy. If appropriate you can ask someone to briefly summarise the conceptual framework as a refresher, either verbally or by drawing on a flipchart.

   - What are the different external influences? How do they affect the household’s activities, assets and capabilities? Do they strengthen or weaken their livelihood strategies?

   - How does the family adjust its livelihood strategy to make the most of opportunities or defend itself against external threats? For how long has the household been making adjustments to cope with particular threats in the environment? Are these adjustments temporary or permanent?

   - Is every individual member of the household affected in the same way? Highlight gender and age differences where relevant.
3. Hand out Activity Guide 1 to every participant and make arrangements to show the film or hand out the case studies.

4. Break people into groups to do the activity.

**Step 3. Case study reports**

**Purpose:** To compare how two households respond to similar kinds of external influence

1. Reconvene the plenary group and ask each group to present its findings.
2. Facilitate a discussion on how the same negative hazard may affect households in different ways. Point out that the differences in the ways that households respond may reflect their relative vulnerability, but that two similar households may respond very differently to the same shock or stress.

**Step 4. Activity 2: Assessing the household’s vulnerability in five years’ time**

**Purpose:** To project a future scenario for the households analysed in Activity 1.

1. Hand out Activity Guide 2 and ask the same small groups to do the activity.
2. Reconvene the plenary and ask the groups to present their role-plays or scenarios.
3. Facilitate a discussion on the features they identified which would affect household livelihood security. Draw out the positive and negative changes in household livelihood strategy and how factors in the external environment have played a role in bringing about these changes. Explore what makes one household able to recover from a shock or adapt to a stress while another cannot. Write points on the flipchart.

**Step 5. Introducing and explaining key concepts**

1. Give your presentation on the vulnerability context. As you bring in each concept, ask participants to explain their own understanding by referring to their case studies or their own experience.
2. Discuss some of the issues of trying to measure vulnerability and the problems that could arise with generalised indexes or indicators of vulnerability.

**Step 6. Activity 3: Assessing the impact of HIV/AIDS on household livelihoods**

*Purpose:* To explore the impact on the household and its livelihood strategies if a household member gets HIV.

1. Hand out Activity Guide 3 and ask the same small groups to do the activity.
2. Reconvene the plenary and ask the small groups to report back.
3. As the groups report, supplement their analysis if necessary to highlight how the family may use up much of its cash for medical care and funeral expenses. This may also require that the family sell off productive assets to raise more cash. You can also examine the negative impacts of HIV/AIDS on the social networks and family support structures and how these may accelerate the impoverishment of families affected by AIDS.

**Step 7. Wrap up**

1. Close the session by emphasising the importance of understanding the vulnerability context and how different households and people within them have different vulnerability thresholds. Poorer households and those with less access to resources are the most at risk. Vulnerability also has gender dimensions.
2. Hand out the copies of the ‘key ideas’ section for participants to keep as a reference.
Learning objectives

By the end of this activity you will have:

- identified the different factors that contribute to the vulnerability of household livelihoods
- examined how households adjust their livelihood strategies to cope with external threats or respond to opportunities
- assessed how different members of the household may be affected by a change in the vulnerability context.

What to do

1. Once you are in your group, choose someone to facilitate the activity and someone to record your discussion.

2. The facilitator will show you a case study film or give you a printed case study to read.

   - Identify the household’s assets, capabilities and activities and how these combine to form its livelihood strategy.
   - What are the different external influences? How do they affect the household’s activities, assets and capabilities? Do they strengthen or weaken their livelihood strategies?
   - How does the family adjust its livelihood strategy to make the most of opportunities or defend itself against the external threats? For how long has the household been making adjustments to cope with particular threats in the environment? Are these adjustments temporary or permanent?
   - Is every individual member of the household affected in the same way? Highlight any gender and age differences.

3. Once you have completed your own analysis of the case, have a group discussion and prepare to report back to the plenary on your group’s findings.
The vulnerability context

Activity Guide 2: Assessing the household’s vulnerability in five years’ time

Learning objectives

By the end of this activity you will:

• have identified the key factors likely to influence the case study household’s ability to sustain its livelihood

• projected the impacts of these factors on the household’s livelihood five years into the future

• examined the implications of these trends for livelihoods and development planning.

What to do

1. Read through your notes about your case study household.

2. Identify key external trends. What is looming on the horizon? What is indicated in the film/printed case study about the general way things have been moving?

3. Identify likely changes in the family’s capacities, assets and activities in the next five years. (Children and adults will grow older, assets will be accumulated or lost.)

4. Identify future possibilities the family might take advantage of.

5. Prepare a role-play or a visual picture of the household in five years’ time and prepare to present and explain it.

6. What are the implications of your projection for livelihoods planning? What measures can the household take to counter threats, cope or adapt?
Learning objectives

By the end of this activity you will have:

- analysed the range of impacts on the livelihood and asset base of different households if a member of the household contracts HIV/AIDS
- identified the different ways in which the household will try to cope with these impacts
- explored how the community adapts to there being several households living with AIDS.

What to do

1. Use one of the case studies you have analysed and identify what the potential impacts on the household will be if an economically active member gets HIV.

2. Identify the different ways in which households try to cope if there are one or more household members living with AIDS.

3. Provide examples to show how the household’s stock of social and physical assets is likely to decline and how this will deepen the vulnerability of the household and can make it difficult for it to recover.

4. Identify the different support mechanisms that local communities develop to respond to HIV/AIDS.

5. Prepare to present your analysis to the group.