

TARGET GROUP VULNERABILITIES

Vulnerability refers to exposure to a range of possible harms, and being unable to deal with them adequately.

Because vulnerability refers to a variety of factors, research on vulnerabilities is necessarily multidisciplinary. It involves, among others, the fields of public health, poverty studies, community psychology, social work, criminology, socioeconomic development, architecture and engineering. Well-known, large-scale multidisciplinary efforts in this field include the World Bank's Annual Reports, the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, and the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals.

The main factors causing social vulnerability are: lack of access to resources (including information, knowledge, and technology); poor quality of built and natural environments; limited access to political power and representation; lack of social networks and connections; minority beliefs and customs; deviant lifestyles; age; gender; race; ill-health, either physical or mental, and disabilities (see Cutter, Boruff and Shirley, 2003). Both qualitative and quantitative methods are of assistance in identifying social vulnerabilities. A mixed approach, combining general, contextual, and individual data inputs, is usually the most effective in identifying those vulnerabilities.

According to Cutter, Boruff and Shirley (2003), "There are three main tenets in vulnerability research: the identification of conditions that make people or places vulnerable to extreme natural events, an exposure model (...); the assumption that vulnerability is a social condition, a measure of societal resistance or resilience to hazards (...); and the integration of potential exposures and societal resilience with a specific focus on particular places or regions (...)". The second and third tenets highlight the fact that social vulnerabilities are, to a large extent, a function of social and spatial inequalities. Social and spatial inequalities play a major role both in risk exposure and in gauging the ability of individuals, communities or organisations to deal with such risks.

Empirical research conducted in the INWORK project has identified specific vulnerabilities in the project's target groups. These results fit the general literature on vulnerabilities, as they are structured around three core areas: personal, professional and organisational. However, it should be stressed that these results emphasise a particular – and sometimes overlooked – dimension: the emotional structure of the individual. This is clear in elements such as the fear of stigma, the lack of self-confidence, the low tolerance to frustration and delayed gratification, impatience and poor motivation. The combination of these emotional conditions with the previously identified vulnerabilities may lead to unrealistic expectations. It is important to underscore, however, that these emotional conditions are not necessarily synonymous with mental disorders. In details, the results, organised by areas, were the following:

- Personal: poor health; social destabilisation; lack of support from friends, family or close environment; poor access to the social protection, health and the justice systems; accumulation and spiralling escalation of problems (namely regarding to accommodation, debts, and missing or inexistent identity papers); criminal record; non-standard appearance

- Emotional: psychological destabilisation; fear of stigma, in parallel with a lack of trust in society; repeated experience of failure, which may induce a lower level of tolerance to frustration; low levels of self-confidence
- Professional: low educational level and difficulties in engaging in formal learning; low academic and professional qualifications; lack of professional flexibility; low level of professional skills; long term unemployment, resulting in the loss (or numbness) of skills and work habits; other professionals and clients find it difficult to establish impartial and/or trustworthy relationships; difficulty in coping with changes in established routines, namely professional routines
- Organisational: insufficient social and communication skills; difficulty in defining tasks and expectations regarding their role and outcomes; unrealistic expectations

In summary, the results show that the main needs of our target groups are re-stabilisation and skills development. This can be achieved mainly through work in the following areas:

- confidence-building and self-esteem
- regaining working habits and increasing social skills (e.g. punctuality, perseverance, co-operation, independence)
- professional skills

To be sure, re-stabilisation may involve medical physical and mental issues that require specialised professional care. This is a fundamental reminder of the dimensions that may need to be addressed when developing work integration programmes and defining individual objectives and expectations.

For this reason, identifying and understanding whatever specific vulnerabilities apply to our target group is crucial to adapt work integration programmes. Also, one should bear in mind that there certainly are differences among individuals, and these need to be considered when negotiating individual goals. Indeed, the type of intervention to be developed is a function of those differences. Likewise, each individual's future trajectory is structured by his/her initial condition. This means that while some individuals will be almost ready to enter the labour market, others won't. Among the latter, some will be able to access the labour market provided they are adequately supported; others, however, will have multiple, serious problems, and employment won't be a realistic possibility for them in the short-term. So, it is necessary to be prepared to acknowledge and integrate a range of individual trajectories. In other words, to consider a range of solutions, including education, training, supported employment, voluntary work, occupational work, employment in regular labour markets, and a combination of these elements.

There is no doubt that employment is a core variable in social integration. This is a well-established fact. However, as some have been arguing, employment is becoming a scarce resource (Castel, 2003; Méda, 1999). This means that, in every society, in every community, there is a (growing) proportion of citizens that, throughout their lives, will have nothing but an intermittent, precarious relationship with the labour market. This is a sign of important transformations going on in contemporary societies. It is also a sign that, while employment is still a core variable in social

integration, it is important not to stigmatise those who, for some reason, have not developed structured, stable relationships with the labour market¹. It may simply be the case that there are not enough jobs (the current high youth unemployment rates throughout most of Europe are a good example of this). While this is no excuse for giving up, it does need to be carefully thought through, and taken into consideration when analysing each individual's case. Also, it inevitably compels those who develop and implement work integration programmes to consider alternative forms of social integration. This is to be done not only for those whose multiple problems will prevent them from entering the regular labour market, but also for those who, while they are fit and willing to work, do not manage more than an intermittent, precarious relationship with the regular labour market. That is, the context in which the individual lives must be carefully considered.

Finally, while this section dealt with target group vulnerabilities, it must not be forgotten that its skills and strengths also need to be duly considered for the work integration programme to be successful.

References

Castel, Robert (2003). *Transformation of the social question*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Cutter, Susan, L.; Boruff, Bryan J., and Shirley, W. Lynn (2003). *Social vulnerability to environmental hazards*. *Social Science Quarterly*, 84(2), 243-261.

Méda, Dominique (1999). *O trabalho: um valor em vias de extinção*. Lisboa: Fim de Século.
