

A person wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and dark shorts is walking barefoot on a dirt path. The person is seen from behind, walking away from the camera. The background consists of a steep, rocky hillside with sparse vegetation. The entire image has a blue-tinted, halftone dot pattern.

**THE RAPID ASSESSMENT OF  
VULNERABLE POPULATIONS:  
A 'BAREFOOT' MANUAL**

by A. David Napier

## PART 1

# Assessing Vulnerability: An Introduction

The purpose of this manual is threefold: 1) to assist professional and community researchers in assessing human vulnerability; 2) to guide the most effective allocation of available resources in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations; and 3) to help identify local networks most capable of building social capacity in periods of instability and systemic change. To achieve these ends, *The Rapid Assessment of Vulnerable Populations Manual* combines innovative approaches to effective vulnerability assessment and best practice recommendations for positive behavior change into a simple field manual.

### Goal

The goal of this manual is to guide organizations, activists, and volunteers in responding coherently and effectively to the rapid increase in vulnerability that occurs when stable social networks are under threat. To achieve this goal, *The Rapid Assessment of Vulnerable Populations* builds on two basic ideas: first, that long-term change depends upon stable local networks that can maintain the equitable distribution of resources beyond any given intervention; and second, that vulnerability assessment, social capacity building, and behavior change must be addressed together if the benefits of any intervention are to be sustained.

### Background

This manual combines knowledge gained through interventions in natural and human disasters and through long-term anthropological research in both remote and urban settings. Addressing vulnerability depends on understanding the specific conditions that generate instability, suffering and ill-health at a given field site. *The Rapid Assessment of Vulnerable Populations*, therefore, focuses on how assessments can be conducted locally under trying financial and social conditions, and on how information gathered through these assessments can be applied to decision making about effective resource allocation and introduction of long-term change strategies.

The techniques outlined in the manual are explicitly “barefoot”. They are a simple step-by-step introduction designed to integrate - where feasible - into more complex investigations and interventions, but they are not dependent on large-scale funding or on complex data collection and analysis. However, the “barefoot” techniques outlined in this small manual apply as much to locations where state and national resources are available, as they do to locations where such resources are absent. This is because **the manual’s basic premise is that once individuals lack social capability they lack the ability to seize opportunities for positive change and act on them.**

## Premise

In times of crisis and social instability it is natural that people focus on their own advancement and welfare, and in extreme situations their survival and the survival of their families and kin. Though altruism can be evidenced even in the hardest of times, when resources are scarce, inequalities are exaggerated. Vulnerability is, therefore, a relative phenomenon, meaning that as inequalities escalate certain categories of individuals emerge as more or less vulnerable. For those in a position to assist affective resource allocation depends on a clear knowledge of who does and who does not have the **capability, opportunity, and motivation to affect positive change on a day-to-day basis**. To address vulnerability those who try to assist must, therefore, be able to identify what categories of people suffers most in unstable conditions, so as to assess quickly and accurately where resources can be most effectively applied.

Though general categories of vulnerability may be recognized internationally (as, for example, when children are forced to care for the basic food and shelter needs of other children), relative vulnerability varies widely based on local conditions of instability, suffering, and ill-health. Because of such variations, both assessments and responses must be fine-tuned at the local level if they are to limit waste of resources and are to have lasting consequences.

While the common-sense approach on which this manual is based has always been acknowledged in any kind of vulnerability intervention, understanding where capability becomes incapability has rarely been the focus of assessment; nor has local assessment been designed from the outset to gather accurate information that can be directly integrated into large-scale interventions and lasting capacity building. This manual is designed specifically to remedy these problems. Using new techniques and simple technologies, *The Rapid Assessment of Vulnerable Populations* outlines where assessment must begin, how best to carry it out, and when and how to apply what is learned about the identification and needs of vulnerable populations.

## Getting Started

Wasted assistance happens when providers assume they know and understand the priorities of recipients, and assume that potential recipients are able to make use of what is provided to address basic needs. But because uptake is based upon assistance matching needs priorities and the motivation and capacity of recipients to act, it is critical that any aid intervention be carried out in conjunction with immediate information gathering. To carry out an effective vulnerability assessment three basic kinds of information need to be gathered and integrated into any planned intervention.

### 1) Knowledge About Existing Resources

First, it is necessary to establish what formal resources are available to assist vulnerable peoples and the nature of local knowledge regarding such resources. This information is crucial both in order to understand the nature of local responses at the outset of an intervention, and to assure that an intervention does not damage fragile informal networks that may already be at work under conditions of duress. The first rule is to identify what works and assure that it is not damaged.

Many well-intended interventions fail from the outset because charities, NGOs, and government organizations work to their own guidelines, fulfilling the expectations of funders and organizational benchmarks. But without some basic understanding of local perceptions no intervention can be effective. Time and again interventions are marred by not realizing that those in need may have little or no awareness of the nature and purpose of assistance (especially in countries where governments may be as much feared as trusted).

Example: T-shirts and caps handed out to volunteers in disaster settings may as much associate them in the eyes of the needy with agents of a corrupt government or militia, and new SUVs may as much call to mind the presence of an oppressive military force as they do the signs of care and assistance. For these reasons the first step in any assessment must focus not only on what resources can be brought in, but on knowledge and perceptions regarding available assistance. Part I of this manual, then, focuses specifically on a limited number of basic questions that can be adjusted locally to assess local understanding and the response capabilities of those in need.

## 2) Understanding Collapse and innovation

Second, since instability and profound change undermines social networks while resource scarcity increases inequalities, effective intervention depends upon understanding how formal and informal community networks respond to social instability and change. Some local institutions will collapse completely, while others will be transformed for either better or worse. Some will evolve quickly into corrupted networks of self-interest, while others can hold the seeds of future innovation and sustainable development. Some individual behaviours will adapt to new conditions, while others are maintained to the detriment of a person's or society's health and wellbeing. Effective vulnerability assessment depends, therefore, on a simple determination of the status of communal systems.

## 3) Assessing Vulnerability on the Ground

Third, internationally recognized categories of vulnerability offer a broad rubric within which to direct assistance resources, but they do not help identify unique forms of local vulnerability that are the outcome of the transformation or collapse and change of local institutions, rules, and mores. Nor do widely recognized categories of vulnerability in themselves allow for the determination of which groups of people suffer most or are in immediate need of assistance. Often the most needy lack the very capacity to express their needs. Accurate vulnerability assessment, therefore, depends on employing locally gathered information both to identify uniquely vulnerable groups, and to verify if, and if so how, internationally recognized categories of vulnerability apply to local conditions of need. Possessing this information is the foundation for the best utilization of limited resources and provides the most effective basis for successful relief work. However, in order to know how best to utilize information gathered in this domain, information from domains one and two must first be gathered because any intervention applied without knowledge of levels of local understanding and the capacity of local institutions to innovate for the public good will leave only uncertainty and potentially more disaster in its wake.

These processes will be fully explained and justified in Chapter 2. Following this discussion a methodology for accurately integrating valuable field information into large-scale national and regional data sets will be described in Chapter 3.

## PART 2

# Understanding Categories of Vulnerability

Generic domains of vulnerability derive from widely accepted international criteria that characterize specific categories of disadvantage. These categories represent conditions that most often lead to vulnerability under conditions for social instability and profound societal change. This barefoot manual demonstrates that, while dominant conditions of vulnerability may prevail globally, vulnerable groups are dependent on local circumstances that are highly variable. Indeed, categories of extreme vulnerability may be expressed locally and in the absence of global parallel examples.

However, global categories of vulnerability have proven enough salient to provide a starting point in any assessment. This vulnerability assessment manual builds, therefore, on these well-know categories, but neither prioritizes them nor sees them as complete.

For example: in Myanmar/Burma all broad, globally-recognized categories of vulnerability were represented within a large-scale household survey of some 13,000 individuals. These households included the following vulnerable groups:

1. Households with malnourished children
2. Households with school-age children not attending school
3. Households with reduced utilization of resources (land, housing, income, etc.)
4. Households with children living in sub-standard accommodation.
5. Female-headed households with young children.
6. Households in which main domestic carer is male.
7. Households in which main carer is less than eighteen years old.
8. Households in which the main carer is a grandparent.
9. Households that now consist of members of different households.
10. Households with an adolescent girl who is unrelated to the head of household.

Comprehensive though this list may appear, it does not reflect all conditions of vulnerability; nor indeed can it identify local forms of vulnerability as can the 'barefoot' verification instrument.

This inability is no fault of those who implement baseline quantitative assessments; the inability is rather the result of a problem with large-scale surveys in general—the larger they get, the LESS accurate they become in describing local conditions of instability. By contrast “the qualitative instrument builds upon data that is both technical (definitions of malnutrition, reduced utilization of land, and sub-standard accommodation) and empirical (female-headed household with young children and household in which main carer is a grandparent (Periodic Review I: 96)”. This combination allows the ‘barefoot’ instrument to identify new kinds of local vulnerability, some forms of which may turn out to be more troubling, dangerous, and difficult to address than the aforementioned baseline categories.

In fact, the ‘barefoot’ technique may expose new and novel conditions of vulnerability. In Burma, for instance, it exposed the fact that NONE of the key global categories were as dangerous for female children in times of general crisis than certain local alienating practices that left some young girls without any social support. In particular, young girls on reaching puberty are denied access to monasteries and the shelter monasteries otherwise offer to those in need. In times of extreme social instability (in this case following a tragic natural disaster) having no refuge made orphaned young girls seeking refuge in local temples far more vulnerable than any of the other more widely recognized categories.

In order to understand how and why this assessment tool works, it is therefore essential first to grasp its basic structure, and in particular why information must be gathered in three crucial domains. Indeed, it is the combination of information gathered from these three distinct domains that makes possible an accurate vulnerability assessment.

### **Three Kinds of information are Required to Fine-Tune a Local Assessment.**

#### **I. External (‘Formal’) Responses**

In this first phase, levels of vulnerability are identified by the presence or absence of formal assistance (F1) and, where present, the details of aid implementation and its effects (F2-F6). Understanding what is on offer, how what is on offer is locally understood, and what services are taken up or not, allows aid organizations and carers to evaluate levels of uptake and adherence.

Formal questions, therefore, need to be asked. Though quite general in nature, these questions work to produce a baseline understanding of what is useful in addressing local needs, but only to the degree that those who have voice can express such need locally. Here we are after a general understanding, but one that recognizes from the start that the most needy may not be in a position to speak for themselves and indicate their basic needs to providers.

The resulting data can then be checked against household information where available.

**(F1) Nature of assistance received (which Government agencies, UN agencies, international NGOs, local NGOs)?**

**(F2) Period (when)?**

**(F3) Duration of effect (temporary or long-term)?**

**(F4) Type (kind of assistance provided)?**

**(F5) Needs met?**

**(F6) Equality of access?**

#### **Specific Questions:**

(F1) Has your community received assistance (e.g., NGO, cash for work programme) from an outside organization or agency? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

(F1) If yes, what type of organization/agency assisted your community?

(F2) During what period has that organization/agency assisted your community?

(F3) Did that assistance have a temporary or a long-term effect?

(F4) What kind of assistance was provided?

(F5) Did this assistance meet any of your household needs? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

(F5) If yes, what household needs were met?

(F5) What household needs were not met?

(F5) Did this assistance meet your personal needs? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

(F5) If yes, what personal needs were met?

(F5) What personal needs were not met?

(F6) Has everyone in your community benefited from this assistance?

(F6) If not, what groups benefitted from outside assistance?

(F6) If not, what groups did not benefit from outside assistance?

(F6) In general, was the assistance good for your community? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

(F6) If yes, why?

(F6) If no, why not?

## II. Local ('Community') Responses

Because in times of crisis community structures are often radically reshaped, seeing which one deteriorate, dissolve, mutate, and adapt allows us to understand both how disasters can destroy or undermine fragile institutions, but also how some institutions may adapt destructively or beneficially in new and unexpected ways. It is, therefore, essential in any vulnerability assessment to understand the local dynamic changes that either disappear or transform, and to understand how when they do transform if their transformations are pathological or productive.

Stress induces social change—often for the worse, but sometimes for the better. See how institutions adjust locally can, therefore, allow us to understand which are positioned to enhance relief efforts or, indeed, to become the basis for post-disaster reconstruction. Understanding the dynamic changes that occur in community domains is often least understood by aid organizations dominated by the need to fulfill expectations of funders. But for those victimized by natural and/or human disaster, knowing what happens to community domains is key to enhancing long-term sustainable responses.

Community domains examine indigenous community structures, modes of cooperation, resilience, and mutability. Community [C] domains include:

- (C1) Nature of community cooperation (Presence or absence?)**
- (C2) Customary rules (Do they exist? What are they? Compliance?)**
- (C3) Duration of effect (Temporary or long-term?)**
- (C4) New Forms?**
- (C5) Equality of access?**
- (C6) Sustainability (will they continue and/or grow? How can we work with them to enhance sustainability, or replace them if they are destructive?)**

### Specific Questions:

- (C1) Did members of your community cooperate to assist one another when \_\_\_\_\_?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- (C2) If yes, in what ways did members of your community cooperate?
- (C2) Are there traditions or customs that promote cooperation? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- (C2) Have those traditions or customs been followed? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- (C3) If yes, are the forms of cooperation these traditions or customs promoted temporary or long-term?
- (C4) Has following those traditions or customs results in new forms of cooperation?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- (C4) If yes, what kinds of new community groups have been formed?
- (C5) If yes, have those new community groups benefited everyone?
- (C6) If yes, do you think these new groups will continue? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
- (C6) If you think they will grow and continue, how do you think they might best grow?

## 3. Vulnerability Identification

Only once the impact of formal institutions (F) is understood, and the dynamics of community-based responses (C) accounted for, can a proper vulnerability assessment be carried out; for without understanding both it is impossible to assess qualitative information and, therefore, impossible to identify the most vulnerable category of all—namely, those without voice. To reach such an understanding accurately, workers need to know how to identify those who cannot speak for themselves.

Achieving accuracy here means being able to see both where aid interventions fail (how, that is, the qualitative 'barefoot' intervention can act as a 'verification instrument') and also where community responses have either failed (become pathological) or adapted in helpful ways (that is, become the basis for productive innovation).

Vulnerability domains examine perceptions of vulnerability. Vulnerability (V) domains of inquiry include:

- (V1) Identifying the vulnerable (Who suffered most?)**
- (V2) Nature of Vulnerability (Kind of vulnerability?)**
- (V3) Coping (Patterns altered?)**
- (V4) Normal or calamity coping (Kind of adjustment? Stable or unstable? Sustainable or temporary?)**

### Specific Questions:

- (V1) What groups of people do you think suffer most in (name focus of research) \_\_\_\_\_?
- (V1) Can you list in order the most vulnerable groups of people (who has suffered most)?
- (V2) Can you tell us why they are the most vulnerable?
- (V3) Can you tell us how their patterns of living have been altered?
- (V4) Has the division of labor within your household changed as the result of \_\_\_\_\_ (name focus of research)?
- (V4) Has your own life changed as the result of \_\_\_\_\_ (name focus of research)?

## PART 3

# Integrating Qualitative ‘Barefoot’ Data and Large-scale Data Sets

### The Rationale for integrated Research

In many instances accurately integrating qualitative and quantitative data is prohibited by resource limitations, but it is also limited by poorly structured and sometimes wholly autonomous assessment procedures.

However, the importance of integrating where possible cannot be overstated. Think, on the one hand, about how often large-scale assessments misjudge measurement needs and goals, and, on the other hand, how local, qualitative descriptions—for example of reported suffering—are exaggerated or ignored as non-representative. Reflecting momentarily on the weaknesses of each approach itself demonstrates the need for complete integration. Being able to tie detailed qualitative descriptions to large-scale data sets makes possible two important innovations:

First, it allows surveyors to determine if the quantitative measure are the right ones. Did researchers get it right? Are there crucial questions that should have been asked but were not? Are there local categories of high vulnerability that have been missed by the superimposing of more generic categories of vulnerability?

Second, integration allows for rich quantitative descriptions (narratives, stories, open ended exploratory inquiries) to be matched directly to quantifiable outcomes. The emotive characterizations that are both the strength and the weakness of qualitative narratives can now be tied to absolute numbers. Here, in other words, is a ‘story’ that links directly to an absolute percentage of a given population that will eventually emerge when an integrated quantitative assessment is eventually completed.

These integration practices are, in other words, symbiotic. Each enhances the other—and, when carried out properly, not only insofar as they provide different kinds of information: in an integrated initiative they actually enhance one another’s accuracy in a significant degree. Indeed, carrying out integrated assessments is the single best guarantee for monitoring intervention procedures and for assuring that such procedures are efficiently addressing specific needs. This integration is so critical to accurate assessment that its importance cannot be overestimated.

In summary, there are two key reasons for integrating otherwise mixed method research. The first reason is that local ‘barefoot’ techniques allow for an appreciation of important local variations that may be missed in broad and uniform assessments, enabling aid workers to grasp quickly the weakness of applying generic assumptions to often-variable local circumstances. In this sense, a ‘barefoot’ assessment functions as a ‘verification instrument’ for intervention programs that otherwise might have been rolled out indiscriminately. Their strength is in their ability to change an evidence base: they are less dogmatic, that is, in forcing a particular strategy because their knowledge is new. And because of this newness, they make it possible to acknowledge the usefulness of regularly adjusting, and even reshaping radically, an intervention in light of changing needs. In short, they make possible an ongoing and dynamic self-assessment of a large-scale intervention.

Because it is based on immediate and local evidence, the ‘barefoot’ method provides for self-correction, which is why it is critical in producing enhanced outcomes. Here, on-the-ground assessment can actually form the basis of sound resource utilization because, if used correctly, they introduce challenges to the presumptions and assumed knowledge on which quantitative surveys are by definition based. The practice of integrating on-the-ground, qualitative assessments into large-scale data sets promotes, therefore, more scientifically rigorous field practice than stand-alone, large-scale quantitative assessments.

Second, using the three-step process explained in Chapter 2, allows for the accumulation of deep levels of description that can be tied directly to quantitative data sets—including those already existing for a population; those collected in parallel with the ‘barefoot’ assessment; and those gathered at a later date.

It is this direct tying together of specific examples with statistically meaningful information about a population’s needs that this chapter will, therefore, focus on.

### How to integrate Data Sets: The Gold Standard

To assure that limited resources are best utilized and that those resources are being applied to assist those most in need, vulnerability information must be gathered that both defines various case definitions in local terms, and that shows how those case definitions related to standard measures of health and wellbeing.

The key to assuring that locally gathered qualitative data can be correlated accurately with quantifiable measures of health and wellbeing is to link that information directly to broadly defined vulnerability categories used globally regardless of local circumstances.

The key to assuring that such information can be gathered and applied quickly is to establish a filtering technique whereby actual examples of case definitions can be identified quickly and assessed on site. To achieve accuracy, therefore, every effort must be made to tie novel information gathered in the field to information already being utilized in decision-making.

An accurate 'barefoot' assessment, therefore, requires identifying methods that make possible the concise utilization of novel information to reshape decision-making. This reshaping is especially critical when important areas of need not previously appreciated have been identified through a 'barefoot' assessment.

However, applying qualitative 'barefoot' data must be done carefully if its accuracy is to be guaranteed. Under ideal circumstances quantitative health and well-being surveys should take place side-by-side with 'barefoot' assessments, and the information gathered in one domain should inform procedures in the other. How can such an assessment be accomplished? The gold standard is not, therefore, a 'mixed methods' technique, but an ***integrated mixed methods technique***.

### **Mixed Methods Approaches**

Though this tool was designed specifically for the rapid assessment of vulnerable populations in times of extreme social unrest, its structure can be applied to any vulnerability assessment provided one understands the fundamental need to gather information about how groups relate or fail to relate to formal and informal assistance structures. The Post-cyclone intervention in Myanmar for which this tool was initially designed was the first time in which such a uniformly integrated and quantitatively verifiable technique was employed in a post-disaster assessment. While this intervention provides an example of how such integrated work can be achieved under trying circumstances, the formal features of the intervention can be applied anywhere, as they relate less to conditions of urgency than to the drawbacks of using quantitative survey assessments as sole source for understanding vulnerability.

Users of this technique may, therefore, wish to modify it for diverse purposes, incorporating it into other integrated strategies, such as when using categories derived from quantitative data sets to identify interviewees, or when applying data filters to big data sets to create new research cohort.

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