

About briefs

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Abstract

Risk and vulnerability patterns in southern Africa are affected by political, socio-economic, and environmental conditions and HIV/AIDS. Typical annual vulnerability assessments provide predictions of pending rural livelihood-cum-food crises. While concerns regarding the reliability and accuracy of these predictions may have been a factor in donors' cautious approaches to recent humanitarian appeals, scepticism about the correctness of forecasts can come at a high cost. Notwithstanding the major achievements in the Malawi emergency response programme in the period October 2005 to March 2006, delayed and partial responses - July to September 2005 - contributed to extreme food price fluctuation which worsened the levels of household vulnerability in late 2005 and early 2006.

Predictive performance of the 2005 Annual Vulnerability Assessments in Lesotho and Malawi

Early warning systems (EWS) are widely recognised as worthwhile and necessary investments. Coupled with better preparedness and response mechanisms, they have proven to be very effective in reducing disaster risks. Globally, drought and storm death tolls are being reduced through EWS and the recovery programmes implemented in their aftermath.

While EWS strive to improve and develop, levels of vulnerability are rising. Many population groups are increasingly at risk as a consequence of mounting poverty, failed development, economic shocks, protracted conflicts, market failures, and the effects of HIV/AIDS. Due to climate change and degraded environments, the impacts of natural hazard are also growing. In many circumstances livelihoods, and the ability of households to cope with shocks, are deteriorating rapidly. Risk and vulnerability patterns are therefore increasingly multifaceted. EWS must therefore integrate hazard surveillance with a better understanding of the political, socio-economic and environmental aspects of vulnerability. In addition to strong technical foundations and good knowledge of the risks, effective EWS must be strongly 'people centered'. They should issue clear messages that reach those at risk, and link to knowledgeable responses used by risk managers and the public. Failure in any one part can mean failure of the whole system.

Accordingly, EWS need to combine 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' elements. A community approach is essential to identify needs and patterns of vulnerability, and to develop the legitimacy required to ensure that warnings are acted upon. In both Lesotho and Malawi, a participatory bottom-up approach has been absolutely crucial in profiling local-level livelihoods, and socio-economic or wealth-based differences in capacities to respond to shocks. Information needs to flow from global, regional and national monitoring systems. This requires support at a high level through information systems, scientific analytical capacity and policy frameworks.

In southern Africa the approach has been labelled 'Vulnerability Assessment and Analysis' or VAA. Ideally this type of technical monitoring service should be an integral part of a wider EWS, spanning knowledge of the risks faced, monitoring and forecasting, dissemination and response programmes.

Fundamental development problems usually explain why hazard events culminate in human and economic disasters. They include:

- the persistence of widespread urban and rural poverty;
- the degradation of the environment resulting from the mismanagement of natural resources;
- inefficient public policies;
- lagging and misguided investments in infrastructure; and
- the added problem of a continuing lack of comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS prevention methods.

Until relatively recently, disaster-related policies largely focused on emergency response, leaving a serious underinvestment in hazard prevention and mitigation. Disaster risk management thinking highlights the need to co-ordinate emergency response with wider development goals. Rather than treating symptoms when disasters happen, the disaster risk management approach aims to break the cycle of loss and recovery by addressing the root causes of vulnerability. From this perspective, development activities should be designed to compliment disaster prevention and disaster mitigation objectives. Simultaneously, emergency response, relief and recovery operations need to address the structural causes of vulnerability. In southern Africa, this shift in focus is clearly expressed in the calls to link VAA work to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), emerging social protection agendas and innovative agricultural and livelihood programmes. This has important implications for the broader conceptualisation of response programmes which can span institutional arrangements, market instruments, food aid, cash transfers, social protection and livelihood development.

Predictive performance of Vulnerability Assessment Committees (VACs)

There are a number of dimensions to assessing the predictive performance of the EWS. The process of giving a forecast requires that we use a 'model' of how a system works to predict (given what we know now) what happens, or is likely to happen, in the near future. The model used can be very basic or intuitive (for example, less rain = less domestic production = likely food deficit), or increasingly sophisticated, such as the HEA system currently used by the Malawi VAC (MVAC).

Generally the quality of any prediction is likely to be affected by the breadth and accuracy of the model used. A comprehensive model is more likely to produce better predictions than a limited one. We must therefore assess whether the technical monitoring and warning service has a sound scientific basis for predicting the risks faced. Are the right things being monitored? In Malawi and Lesotho the Household Economy Approach (HEA), embedded in entitlement theory, provides the scientific basis for the annual estimates of missing income/food entitlements. Secondly, predictions are about communicating in advance. The performance of the EWS is also judged by its ability to communicate the probable outcomes. In addition to generating accurate warnings in a timely manner, we should therefore assess whether they get to the right people and are they understood.

There is a third, but more debatable aspect. How well do the technical monitoring and dissemination functions

link with the response systems? Do the assessments secure effective and appropriate actions? It is debatable whether VACs should provide detailed prescriptions for interventions. Some VAC practitioners are very clear on this. Their answer is no. Projections about the nature and magnitude of the problem are given in terms of missing food entitlements (MFEs) and not in terms of how to intervene in each specific context. This position is somewhat reinforced by the lack of consensus within the donor, UN and humanitarian relief community over how best to react. The practice of 'knowledgeable responses used by risk managers and the public' is being critically reviewed in the context of range of long-established responses and a growing number of 'pilot initiatives'. From this perspective VACs see themselves as providers of early warnings and not as providers of detailed intervention programmes.

However, others suggest that VACs should be making more concrete and specific recommendations on how to intervene. These users want the early warning documents to function as needs assessments. The VACs, on the other hand, are happy to have their early warnings verified through independent and in-depth needs assessments, because their nationwide mandate means lack of comprehensive coverage at the local level.

The following issues are relevant to the predictive performance of VACs:

- Do the VAC analyses adequately focus on the risks and uncertainties that may affect the projected outcomes of their forecasts?
- How comprehensive is the information and analysis?
- How well are the predictions communicated?
- Are they authoritative?
- Do they inform decision makers at various levels and trigger changes in ongoing responses?
- How responsive is the system to new information and the production of updates?
- How timely are the analyses and updates?

Practical lessons and priorities for evidence building

Highlights from the fast-track studies in Lesotho and Malawi indicate that:

VACs are critically constrained by the availability of skilled personnel. Given the extent of skills shortages, it is probably correct to focus attention on establishing the sustainability of VAC capacities at the national level before responding to any imperatives to decentralise. At the same time it seems logical to involve districts in the VAC process. Engagement at the sub-national level will require much expanded inputs for training and capacity building.

HEA currently does not separate out different aspects of vulnerability, in particular chronic versus acute income/food insecurity and the effects of HIV/AIDS. Supplementary tools, approaches and partnerships will need to be put into place so that these aspects can more systematically be addressed.

Weak information systems result in insufficient attention being paid to monitoring the core VAA assumptions. The Lesotho VAC and partners need to advocate for a more comprehensive information system by identifying critical areas for improvement.

The practice of updating initial VAA findings, as carried out in Malawi, provides a 'clearer picture' of the situation on the ground. The production of annual reports should therefore anticipate an updating process. VACs should also be willing to make area specific updates and modify forecasts as soon as is possible.

Currently lessons from the past are not easily fed into the improvement of the EWS. To enhance the effectiveness of the warning system, response and development monitoring systems should be linked to the forecast calendar.

Reports are described as 'too scientific' for district level readers. Summary basic statements are required for a wider audience.

Political interference is seen as a big threat to the VAA. Politicisation of disputed cases can undermine VAC authority. VACs must therefore establish procedures to deal with contested elements of their assessments. There should be rapid follow up of any disputed analyses and much greater emphasis should be placed on consultation and debriefing of district staff.

More attention needs to be given to district level audiences and ideally results/reports should be tied to administrative and programming units. Whenever possible, there should be an interactive analysis that brings together district councils, local government authorities and area executive committees to discuss preliminary results.

While nationwide VAA inevitably lacks comprehensive coverage at the local level, decentralisation processes imply a greater executive role for local government. The response systems, driven by central vulnerability plans, must not become rigid and inflexible and must take account of changing conditions and appeals originating from districts.

Highlights of the opinion survey

As part of the main study, a rapid pilot survey was used to assess the opinion of a representative group of VAC

users, drawn from a range of organisations and sectors at national and sub-national levels. It canvassed views on the technical and scientific soundness of the VAC approach and general perceptions about the reliability, accuracy, timeliness and effectiveness of the VAC early warnings. It is important to note that these findings were the output of a three-day pilot initiative and a limited number of responses in each country.

General awareness of, access to and use of VAC 2005 assessments

The survey indicated a much greater general awareness about the VAC assessments and activities and access to the reports in Malawi than in Lesotho. While more than 70% of respondents in Malawi were aware of the NVAC assessment reports, in Lesotho more than half (51%) of respondents (and assumed VAC users) turned out to be unaware of the Lesotho VAC (LVAC) reports.

Further analyses illustrated differences in awareness between national and district levels in Lesotho: 50% of national respondents had a copy of the report, compared with 22% of district-level respondents, whereas as many as 53% of district-level respondents had a copy of the Malawi report. While no sample was taken at the national level in Malawi, it is very likely that awareness of the VAC assessment would be higher than the 70% registered at the district level.

Sector level awareness of, access to and use of VAC 2005 assessments

In Lesotho the level of use of the information in the VAC reports was low. Fifty-two percent of agriculture and food security respondents were aware of the assessments, 35% had access to a copy of the report and 39% had referenced the report. In contrast, in Malawi the level of information use by agriculture and food security respondents was high, at 91%.

Humanitarian relief and disaster management sector workers had high awareness of the LVAC assessment, and make use of the information. There was little awareness of LVAC reports by planning and development sector respondents.

In Malawi, district administrative workers exhibited a very high (93%) awareness of VAC assessments: 86% had a personal or office copy of the report, while 79% made use of information in the reports and baselines. Planning and development sector workers generally had better awareness of, access to and use of reports and baseline information than Lesotho. Health and nutrition sector workers in Malawi generally appear to be unaware

of the MVAC. This may be an indicator of a lack of a two-way flow, from MVAC to district health and nursing officers and vice-versa. This situation is compensated for by inputs from the Malawi Integrated Nutrition and Food Security Surveillance System which participates as a member of the MVAC.

Opinion on various aspects of the VACs' predictive performance

The survey suggested generally much greater confidence in the Malawi assessment than in the Lesotho assessment. Different versions of HEA have given rise to differences in the quality of the baseline information and modelling methods used in the two countries. The HEA approach was recognised as 'relevant and useful' (though questioned by some in Lesotho). It secured a good or high approval ranking in the case of Malawi. Respondents were also generally supportive of the statement that 'the 2005 VAC assessment(s) provided timely early warning', with 61% in Lesotho and 76% in Malawi agreeing with the statement.

Sixty-two percent of respondents in Lesotho agreed with the statement that 'the 2005 VAC predictions provided a good picture of the humanitarian assistance required'. The figure for Malawi was 43%.

This disapproving result for Malawi, may be explained by the perception of poor levels of assistance that came into the area and not by what was specified in the technical reports. In this sense the MVAC and the wider response programme are seen as one entity. The Malawi response programme from June to September was woefully inadequate, and there was a 45% shortfall in the provision of needs (actual versus planned) in the period. The shortfall in unmet needs was even more pronounced because the limited allocations were

distributed (for logistical reasons) as full rations to a narrow number of beneficiaries. In such circumstances, it is understandable that district respondents disagreed with the above statement. The assessment process was repeated as the response programme had to be revised. While the allocation plan for December 2005 to March 2006 was upgraded according to the MVAC November update, the increases in allocations only took effect two months later, from January 2006. Perceptions of continuing inadequacy in the response programmes continued into early 2006 and probably influenced responses to this statement.

The statement on whether the VACs identified all the areas of vulnerability was interpreted to include dimensions and aspects of vulnerability other than geographical and administrative areas. The results need to be interpreted accordingly. In Lesotho, 64% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the VAC had identified all areas of vulnerability. There are two explanations for this trend in the opinion. First, there is long experience of social protection issues concerning the destitute, elderly and disabled which the LVAC does not address in its HEA work. Respondents also clearly expressed that the LVAC assessment was not dealing with the shock of HIV/AIDS in its analysis of vulnerability. It was therefore seen to be failing to address areas of chronic illness, orphans and child-headed households, each being important dimensions of vulnerability in Lesotho.

In Malawi, 69% of respondents felt that the MVAC had done a satisfactory job of identifying the vulnerable areas in the country. Although Malawi has a significant HIV/AIDS prevalence with negative impacts on livelihoods, the HEA assessment is apparently seen to account for much of the perceived vulnerability, notwithstanding the specific impacts of AIDS.

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