

BUILDING TRANSFORMATIVE CAPACITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: SURFACING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY VULNERABILITY AND RISK ASSESSMENTS?

Participatory assessments that recognise the social roots of vulnerability are critical in helping individuals and institutions rethink their understanding of and responses to climate change impacts. Oxfam's Vulnerability and Risk Assessment methodology has enabled the seeds of transformation to begin germinating in three southern African countries.

WHAT WAS DONE, AND WHAT WAS NOVEL?

We conducted three Vulnerability and Risk Assessment (VRA) exercises in Malawi, Botswana and Namibia in 2015 and 2016. Using an 'action research' approach, our VRAs brought together a range of stakeholders to participate in an inclusive process, to integrate their diverse knowledge, and find solutions to problems that concern them and their communities.

This is different to the approach taken in traditional research projects and by government authorities doing vulnerability assessments which are largely conducted by experts, and often miss the nuances of local contexts, perspectives, and preferences.

The VRA methodology is also novel in that it goes beyond the quantitative, biophysical focus that has typically been used in vulnerability assessments in the past, to understand relational and structural vulnerabilities, and enable a crucial 'inward journey' among participants. Reflecting on these workshops, this paper explores the contribution that processes like VRA may bring to transformation.

KEY FINDINGS

The VRA exercises undertaken in the three case study countries helped identify and raise the profile of issues that had been previously unaddressed or insufficiently addressed, but that nonetheless contribute to the vulnerability of least-powerful groups. For example, we highlighted challenges faced by mopane caterpillar harvesters in the Bobirwa sub-district, Botswana, and saw how power differentials shifted as stakeholders gained a better understanding of why others were in the room.

In the VRA process in Malawi the issue of harsh treatment of tea pluckers was ultimately recognised by everyone as a key issue. Tea pluckers gained support from the Ministry of Labour, and tea estate managers agreed to form a multi-stakeholder working group to address the harsh treatment.

In Namibia, the VRA highlighted a lack of self-organisation at the community level, and how organised action can promote resilience (e.g., a food bank mechanism at the traditional authority office could contribute to communal food security in the low rainfall season).

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Inclusive participatory approaches can shift narratives and power dynamics, allow marginal voices to be heard, build cross-scalar relationships, and enable the co-creation of solutions. The VRA provides a structure for starting dialogue. The test of the long-term sustainability of the VRAs objectives is in the follow-up, and in subsequent efforts to consolidate relationships between stakeholders.

Furthering the transformation agenda means connecting the VRA outcomes with government and other influential stakeholders, including multilateral organisations. VRA processes should be driven, or gradually taken over, by local stakeholders, rather than external organisations. This requires working together with local actors and organisations from the start.

A more people-centred framing of vulnerability is needed to ensure that adaptation efforts are not primarily focused on infrastructure, or technical fixes. It is fundamental to include issues of power and governance in climate and development research and practice.

