



Social vulnerability assessment: a growing practice in Europe?

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This paper builds upon work on social vulnerability from the CapHaz-Net consortium, an ongoing research project funded by the European Commission in its 7th Framework Programme. The project focuses on the social dimensions of natural hazards, as well as on regional practices of risk prevention and management, and aims at improving the resilience of European societies to natural hazards, paying particular attention to social capacity building. The topic of social vulnerability is one of seven themes being addressed in the project. There are various rationales for examining the relevance of social vulnerability to natural hazards. Vulnerability assessment has now been accepted as a requirement for the effective development of emergency management capability, and assessment of social vulnerability has been recognised as being integral to understanding the risk to natural hazards. The aim of our research was to examine social vulnerability, how it might be understood in the context of natural hazards in Europe, and how social vulnerability can be addressed to increase social capacity. The work comprised a review of research on social vulnerability to different natural hazards within Europe and included concepts and definitions of social vulnerability (and related concepts), the purpose of vulnerability assessment and who decides who is vulnerable, different approaches to assessing or measuring social vulnerability (such as the use of 'classical' quantitative vulnerability indicators and qualitative community-based approaches, along with the advantages and disadvantages of both), conceptual frameworks for assessing social vulnerability and three case studies of social vulnerability studies within Europe: flash floods in the Italian Alps, fluvial flooding in Germany and heat waves in Spain.

The review reveals variable application of social vulnerability analysis across Europe and there are indications why this might be the case. Reasons could range from the scale of country policy and the particular risk management focus to the smaller scale risk management perceptions of the analysis techniques employed being to resource expensive, difficult to interpret or to operationalise. This paper will provide a context with some empirical examples to perhaps explain the growing popularity of concepts such as resilience and capacity building which lie more comfortably with policy makers and risk managers as concepts which focus on the solution rather than identifying a problem by assessing social vulnerability.