



Assessing social vulnerability in African urban context. The challenge to cope with climate change induced hazards by communities and households

Sigrun Kabisch and Nathalie Jean-Baptiste

Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research - UFZ, Leipzig, Germany

Social vulnerability assessment remains central in discourses on global climatic change and takes a more pertinent meaning considering that natural disasters in African countries continue to deeply affect human settlements and destroys human livelihoods. In recent years, in particular large territories and growing cities have experienced severe weather events. Among them are river and flash floods, affecting the social and economic assets of local populations. The impact of the damage related to floods is not only perceptible during seasonal events but also during unexpected larger disasters which place a particular burden on local population and institutions to adapt effectively to increasing climatic pressures.

Important features for social vulnerability assessment are the increasing severity of the physical damages, the shortcoming of social and technical infrastructure, the complexity of land management/market, the limited capacity of local institutions and last but not least the restricted capacities of local population to resist these events. Understanding vulnerability implies highlighting and interlinking relevant indicators and/or perceptions encompassed in four main dimensions: social, institutional, physical and attitudinal vulnerability.

Case studies in Dar es Salaam, Ouagadougou and Addis Ababa were carried out to obtain insights into the context-related conditions, behavior routines and survival networks in urban areas in west and east Africa. Using a combination of tools (e.g. focus group discussions, transect walks, interviews) we investigated in close cooperation with African partners how households and communities are being prepared to cope with, as well as to recover from floods.

A comprehensive process of dealing with floods can be described based on sequential attributes concerning i) Anticipation before a flood occurs, ii) Resistance and coping activities during a flood event and, iii) Recovery and reconstruction afterwards. A participatory approach at household level provides detailed knowledge about the preparedness, the susceptibility and the coping capacities of identified community including its leaders and members. Assessing and ranking the weaknesses and limitations help strengthen awareness and initiate measures for improving coping capacities to social vulnerability in case of flooding. Examples of social vulnerability and the spectrum of coping activities are demonstrated through to use of empirical research results.