

Workshop: Vulnerability analysis and needs assessments in complex settings

Silva Ferretti presented ActionAid (AA)'s Participatory Vulnerability Analysis (PVA)

PVA is a process that involves creating a space for communities and other stakeholders to identify what vulnerability means to them by enabling a conversation to happen between different people about:

- the nature of **threats and hazards** in their daily lives and
- their **level of exposure** to them
- their **vulnerabilities**, and
- the **impact of poverty, abuse of power and the denial of rights** on this vulnerability

This analysis is not an end in itself though. It goes a step further in that it also tries to empower and motivate communities to take appropriate action. This is done by looking at how people have dealt with vulnerability in the past and drawing action. Examples of the kinds of tools AA brings to this analysis include: action plans and M & E frameworks.

PVA is intended to be:

- **multi-level** so that its outcomes move beyond the community to higher level regional and national actors.
- **multi step** looking *backwards* to the history of disasters and responses to them; *deeper* to analyse the key causes and impacts of the vulnerability (including looking at existing coping strategies); and looking *forwards* to draw up a plan of action and follow up implementation

Finally, PVA has a strong focus on power rather than specifically on vulnerability. It stresses the centrality of *people* to any change that is planned.

Workshop discussion

- Whether this approach is realistic given that agencies often have to complete assessments of more than a few villages. *Here Silvia stressed the need to stop focusing on analysis as being all about what organisations need and, rather, to focus on supporting individual communities and helping them to replicate the approach in other villages.*
- This kind of approach should be made common practice for all situations of compounding crisis and should be done on a regular basis so that it does not have to be used **in the midst** of an actual disaster where it is practically impossible to do properly.
- There is a need to link up the different assessments being done so that the same information can be used in different ways for different types of analysis, to avoid duplication of effort.
- What about the role of local democratic structure/initiatives in ensuring that communities have the power to act? People often understand problems very well and the possible solutions to them but lack the power to take action. *Here Silva said that in this type of analysis, agencies needed to decide whether they are doers or brokers. Sometimes it is best to be the broker and simply open a space for dialogue and partnerships.*
- On the issue of power and empowering communities to act, it was said that **power cannot be given** and that what we are really talking about is *access* to it. The importance of looking at existing holders of power in communities flowed from this.
- In relation to power, the issue of **bias** was raised and the fact that some groups misrepresent situations because they know it will bring them assistance. *Here, again, Silva stressed the brokering role of agencies rather than the doing role.*
- The idea of 'community' as a given was challenged also. Do communities actually have a common goal and who is speaking for the community? *Here Silva spoke about how AA's infusion of accountability and transparency mechanisms into the process had been helpful. Making the plan of action and the budget widely available is an example of this.*
- There was discussion about how PVA could be used by **specialist agencies** to inform their programme planning since it appears to be a generic community level assessment. *Here Silva suggested that specialist agencies come in at a slightly higher level rather than at the community level.*