

Identifying vulnerabilities and people at risk in an emergency

Background

Improving our understanding of which groups or communities are likely to be particularly vulnerable in the face of different types of emergencies is a crucial change to ensure that, both nationally and locally, the UK's approach to preparing for and responding to emergencies puts the needs of those most adversely affected by a crisis first.

The UK government has put identifying and addressing the needs of vulnerable groups at the heart of the Government Resilience Framework (GRF) and makes a number of specific commitments. These include:

- Developing a measurement of socio-economic resilience, including how risks impact across communities and vulnerable groups – to guide and inform decision making on risk and resilience.
- Updating guidance from the UK Government to Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and local partners in England, created with local responders, the VCS, and communities to support them working with vulnerable groups.
- Creating a stronger and more consistent approach for operators of essential services to identify, communicate with, and offer support to vulnerable customers and develop an action plan to deliver this.
- Strengthening the requirement to produce a Community Risk Register (CRR) to require responders to consider community demographics (particularly vulnerable groups) in preparing and communicating their CRR, to further consider how emergencies impact on communities.

The British Red Cross welcomes this focus on the needs of people in vulnerable situations and the above commitments. This briefing deals specifically with the commitment to update guidance for LRFs.

Talking about vulnerability

At the British Red Cross, we are moving towards discussing “people in vulnerable situations” rather than “vulnerable groups” as vulnerability is not a characteristic inherent to a person or group, but often is situational. Given this, we would suggest the guidance refers to “people in vulnerable situations” rather than “vulnerable groups”.

What makes people vulnerable to emergencies?

People can experience vulnerability during emergencies for a range of different reasons. These can include, but are not limited to, clinical (i.e., a specific medical condition), economic and social (i.e., loneliness and social isolation), as a result of discrimination (i.e., age, race, or gender), or through situational factors (i.e., the area that you live in or type of accommodation).

At the British Red Cross, we see the range of people's needs in emergencies, from those created by extreme weather events such as storms and floods, to international incidents such as the Afghanistan Crisis or the conflict in Ukraine, or protracted emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. We see the 'business as usual' incidents such as fires and gas leaks, and the impact these 'ordinary' emergencies have on people's lives long-term. From this experience, we have seen that what makes people vulnerable is nuanced and dynamic in nature. A person's ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from a crisis would differ depending on the crisis they were exposed to, and is contingent on a multitude of factors that influence an individual's resilience to an emergency in the short and long-term.

For example, while two households may face the same spatial vulnerability to a flood (i.e., their property is just as likely to flood) in the event of a flood one household might struggle due to pregnancy, old age or limited finances, while another household might not have to contend with these factors. However, the second household may face increased difficulties over time if by comparison they lack social connections, or their local authority struggles to put in place measures to tackle damage to their surrounding infrastructure. We saw this play out when the North East of England and Scotland were hit by numerous storms in recent years. The longer people went without power, the more their underlying vulnerabilities hindered their resilience to that emergency – in particular we saw that a lack of social connections can harm people's recovery. Attention should be given to how disasters can cascade (another example would be that of water-borne disease outbreaks after a flood).

Further, an individual impacted by multiple forms of inequality can experience a compounding effect on their ability to respond to a crisis. For example, a person who is seeking asylum may be particularly impacted by economic constraints and social exclusion, as well as facing barriers to accessing services. The impact of emergencies on different marginalised groups is a developing field of research in the UK, and this was highlighted particularly by the pandemic.¹

Adapted from a literature review conducted for the British Red Cross on 'vulnerability to disasters and emergencies in the UK' completed by Ksenia Chmutina February 2022.

An example of a framework that illustrates what makes someone vulnerable to an emergency is a qualitative **Pressure and Release Model (PAR, Fig.1)**². This

¹ Cortvriend, A., Easthope, L., Edkins, J., and Purnell, K. (eds.) (2023). 'When This Is Over: Tales of an Unequal Pandemic.' Bristol University Press.

IFS (2022). 'Inequality and the Covid crisis in the United Kingdom.' Retrieved from: ifs.org.uk/publications/inequality-and-covid-crisis-united-kingdom

NHS Confederation (2022). 'The unequal impact of COVID-19: investigating the effect on people with certain protected characteristics'. Retrieved from: nhsconfed.org/publications/unequal-impact-covid-19-protected-characteristics

LGA (n.d). 'A perfect storm - health inequalities and the impact of COVID-19'. Retrieved from: local.gov.uk/perfect-storm-health-inequalities-and-impact-covid-19

Gaillard, J.C. (2022). 'The Invention of Disaster: Power and Knowledge in Discourses on Hazard and Vulnerability'. Routledge.

Seglah, H. A., & Blanchard, K. (2021). 'LGBTQIA+ People and Disasters.' Retrieved from preventionweb.net/publication/lgbtqia-people-and-disasters

Seglah, H.A., and Blanchard, K. (2023). 'Housing, Disasters & LGBTQIA+ People'. Retrieved from drrdynamics.com/publications

Kelman, I. (2020). 'Disaster by Choice: How Our Actions Turn Natural Hazards into Catastrophes'. OUP Oxford.

² Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., and Davis, I. (2004). 'At Risk: Natural Hazards'. 2nd ed. Routledge.

allows the exploration of the root causes of vulnerability, and the ability to understand how vulnerabilities change over time.

The PAR model can show *the key drivers of vulnerability to hazards*; it does not however show how to address them. It helps us understand the underlying causes of disasters by highlighting the interactions between social, economic, political, administrative, legal, technological, and environmental determinants as well as their complexity – and can thus be used as a tool for strategic conversations that emphasises the importance of the context as well as data.

PAR comprises four elements that, when combined, can result in a disaster or an emergency. Root causes may be remote geographically from the local site of vulnerability (such as an investment decision by a distant corporation) and/ or remote in time (such as the history of colonialism). Dynamic pressures are normally decadal-scale trends involving business cycles, population dynamics, land use, and governance. They translate or transmit root causes to local scale and present moment, where they produce unsafe conditions and fragile livelihoods. The PAR model shows the relationships among these processes and the intersection of scale over time in combination with a hazard.

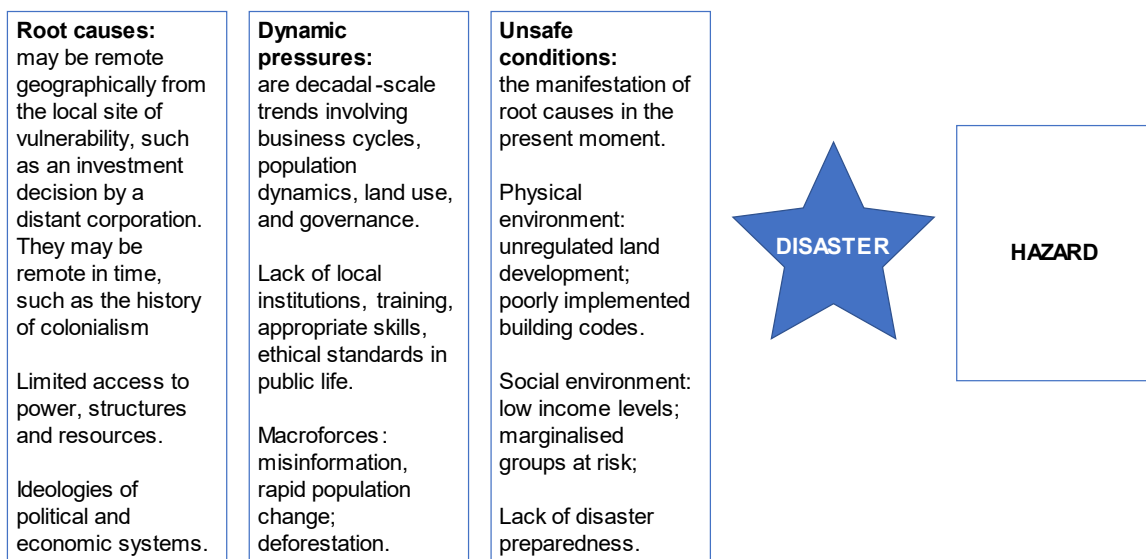


Figure 1: Adapted from the Pressure and Release Model (PAR) framework, taken from Wisner et al., (2004) *At Risk: Natural Hazards*.

Root causes, dynamic pressures, and unsafe conditions should be analysed in combination with indices of deprivation, as this would allow the mapping out of the most vulnerable areas.

Dynamic pressures include both spatial and institutional factors, such as exposure to a hazard, redevelopment or change of the use of land, environmental degradation, access to schools, participation in decision making etc. Unsafe conditions include social, economic, spatial, and institutional factors such as pregnancy, disability, family and household structure, ethnicity, occupation and

employment, housing tenure, access and availability to information about emergencies, digital inclusion, type and condition of housing etc.

It is also important to note that different hazards have different drivers of vulnerability. For each hazard, different combinations of dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions would make people differently vulnerable. For instance, age may be less of a determinant in a flood as compared to extreme temperatures. A rural location would decrease vulnerability during a heatwave; however, vulnerability would increase in a drought as it may affect overall livelihood.

It is important to develop a hazard specific measure of vulnerability, rather than a single model of vulnerability that would be applied to multiple hazards without any hazard-specific considerations.

Problems with the existing guidance

The existing guidance on [Identifying People Who Are Vulnerable in a Crisis](#) was published in February 2008 and is now out of date. It is arguably limited in scope, both in terms of its identification of those that may be vulnerable to a hazard, and also in its conceptualisation of how vulnerabilities may differ from hazard to hazard. It also does not adequately explain how responders can use population level data to understand their area better and plan and respond accordingly.

As a consequence, we know from previous analysis of LRF plans that historically many local areas had given insufficient thought to the impact of an emergency on different potentially vulnerable groups.³ We are hopeful that this situation has improved following the lessons of responding to the pandemic, but, clearly, we would hope that updated guidance would drive a step-change in how all local areas think about and plan for the vulnerabilities of their population. The GRF says that the UK Government will consider putting the Resilience Standards on a statutory footing – this would ensure that LRFs develop a detailed understanding of risk exposure and particular vulnerabilities within the local area as set out in the standards.

How can guidance be improved?

Definition of ‘vulnerability’

The British Red Cross believe the updated guidance should apply a wider understanding of ‘vulnerability,’ considering social and economic vulnerability as well as wider health and wellbeing needs. Currently, the guidance – and additional guidance released during the pandemic – focuses predominantly on medical vulnerabilities. It prioritises knowing who will need physical support to keep safe during a response, which leads to an emphasis on children, older people and people who have physical disability or illness. Increased risk associated with a medical

³ A British Red Cross survey in 2019, found that the majority of the 27 emergency plans surveyed did not include a definition of vulnerability, and not all plans included measures for identifying and helping vulnerable people. See British Red Cross (2019). ‘People Power in Emergencies’. Retrieved from: redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/researchpublications/emergency-response/people-power-in-emergencies.pdf

condition or physical disability is clearly important. However, there should also be greater consideration of wider vulnerabilities including (but not limited to) people with mental health conditions, people experiencing homelessness, people who may experience cultural barriers to accessing information, people seeking asylum, those experiencing financial barriers, insecure employment, and people who have difficulties with trusting support due to experiences of abuse, negative interactions with the system, or discrimination.

Our experience during Covid-19 showed us that simply relying on a narrow definition of vulnerability based on someone's clinical status meant that a wider range of people who faced wider social-economic pressures during the pandemic were often not identified and provided with adequate support. This was shown in the scope of those who were defined as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable by the government (with organisations warning at the time of the need to expand the criteria as people - such as the over 70s or the blind and partially sighted - lost out on much needed support⁴), and the experiences of those who became increasingly financially vulnerable as the pandemic wore on.⁵

We also believe that guidance needs to go beyond simply supporting local responders to identify need in an emergency. The breadth, scope, and importance of meeting people's needs throughout the entire emergency response cycle, from building resilience through to recovery, is made clear in the GRF and must be reflected in updated guidance. For example, the GRF announces a stronger and more consistent approach for operators of essential services to identify, communicate with, and offer support to customers in vulnerable situations and develop an action plan to deliver this. The GRF also outlines that a measurement of socio-economic resilience, including how risks impact across communities and vulnerable groups, is currently in development.

In response to the pandemic, the British Red Cross developed the Covid-19 Vulnerability Index⁶ with the aim of helping us to identify neighbourhoods where higher proportions of people in vulnerable situations lived so our support offer could be targeted to have the most impact.

British Red Cross Vulnerability Index

To meet and target support towards those most in need, the British Red Cross developed a **Covid-19 Vulnerability Index**, which identifies vulnerable areas and groups within local authorities, wards, and neighbourhoods across the UK. This was developed in response to the need for a more holistic understanding of vulnerability.

⁴ Public Accounts Committee (2021). 'Covid-19: supporting the vulnerable during lockdown'. Retrieved from: publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpublicacc/938/93806.htm#

⁵ British Red Cross (2021). Written evidence submission to the 'Risk Assessment and Risk Planning Committee: How do we ensure the UK is resilient to extreme risks and emergencies?'. Retrieved from: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22579/pdf/

British Red Cross (2021). Written evidence submission to the 'Public Accounts Committee Covid-19: Supporting the vulnerable during lockdown'. Retrieved from: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/22909/pdf/

British Red Cross (2021). 'The longest year: life under local restrictions'. Retrieved from: redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/the-longest-year-life-under-lockdown

⁶ British Red Cross (n.d). 'British Red Cross Covid-19 vulnerability index for the UK'. Retrieved from: britishredcrosssociety.github.io/covid-19-vulnerability

The index combines multiple open data sources to map clinical vulnerability (underlying health conditions), demographic vulnerability (over-70s, people seeking asylum), social vulnerability (barriers to housing and services, poor living environment, living in “left-behind” areas, loneliness), health inequalities, and digital exclusion.

As a result, the Index is being used by stakeholders as a reliable and open data source and has made a difference to the way in which stakeholders have responded to unmet community needs. It has been used by city councils, public health organisations, and social investment businesses. For example, the Index has helped the National Lottery Community Fund to coordinate and avoid missing the unmet needs of certain communities and ensure that support reached them. A Social Investment Business was able to undertake a deep dive analysis into the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, examining the current and anticipated economic impact of Covid-19 on this area.

British Red Cross recommendations:

The British Red Cross recommend that the guidance applies a broader understanding of vulnerability that more explicitly considers social and economic vulnerability, as well as wider health and wellbeing needs.

The British Red Cross recommend that, by putting the Resilience Standards on a statutory footing as outlined in the GRF, the government strengthens the requirements on LRFs to develop a ‘detailed understanding of risk exposure and particular vulnerabilities within the local area that may affect the severity of impacts caused by a particular risk’.⁷

Population level data to support planning

Currently, guidance does not support responders to use population level data in planning, yet the use of this data could improve planning and preparedness.

For example, the determinants of vulnerability (outlined in the section above, ‘*What makes people vulnerable to emergencies?*’ which includes social, economic, political, administrative, legal, technological, and environmental factors) could be analysed and mapped. As referred to in the section above, the British Red Cross developed the Covid-19 Vulnerability Index⁸ using neighbourhood-level population data with the aim of helping us and partners to identify neighbourhoods where higher proportions of people in vulnerable situations lived so support could be targeted to have the most impact.

We welcome the announcement of a new socio-economic measure of vulnerability in the GRF but would like to see the guidance encourage local areas to use population

⁷ Cabinet Office (2020). ‘National Resilience Standards for Local Resilience Forums (LRFs)’. Retrieved from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/913502/NRS_for_LRFs_V3.0__Aug_2020.pdf

⁸ British Red Cross (n.d). ‘British Red Cross COVID-19 vulnerability index for the UK’. Retrieved from: britishredcrosssociety.github.io/covid-19-vulnerability/

level data to inform planning and set out how the new measure (when available) should be used to support this.

British Red Cross recommendation:

The British Red Cross recommend that the guidance encourages and supports local areas to use population level data (including the proposed socio-economic measure when available) to map vulnerabilities and develop plans accordingly.

Community engagement and preparedness

Finding solutions to the challenges faced by people in vulnerable situations in an emergency requires strong and inclusive engagement with those communities. Guidance should encourage and provide further signposting to resources on improving community engagement and resilience. For example, in the context of flooding, translating knowledge and awareness into action requires individuals and communities to be linked to the wider flood risk management authorities and networks, and VCS organisations play a crucial role in supporting this collaboration.⁹ Guidance should emphasise the importance of different actors – including individuals, community groups, authorities, businesses, and VCS organisations – in building community resilience.

The **British Red Cross Community Resilience Toolkit** demonstrates how engagement can build resilience to emergencies and help with identifying both local vulnerabilities and capabilities.

The GRF presents a 'whole of society vision' for building resilience and commits to achieving a 'cultural shift' where everyone is prepared, ready to take action and able to support themselves during an emergency.¹⁰ While this level of ambition is welcome, the challenge of behaviour change on such as scale is made more difficult by the variety of risks presented by climate change, which include flooding, heatwaves, droughts, wild-fires, and coastal erosion. Nevertheless, high levels of public concern for climate change and support for adaptation action should provide strong grounds for optimism that it can be achieved.¹¹¹² The challenge is how to transform 'concern about climate change' into 'action for adaptation' at individual and household level for people who are in the most vulnerable situations.

⁹ British Red Cross (2022). 'Every time it rains: British Red Cross research on flooding in the UK'. Retrieved from: redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/every-time-it-rains-british-red-cross-report-on-flooding

¹⁰ Cabinet Office (2022). 'The UK Government Resilience Framework'. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/publications/the-uk-government-resilience-framework/the-uk-government-resilience-framework-html

¹¹ Ipsos MORI Research Institute (2013). 'PREPARE - Climate risk acceptability Findings from a series of deliberative workshops and online survey'. Retrieved from: randd.defra.gov.uk/ProjectDetails?ProjectID=18552

¹² Ipsos (2020). 'Two thirds of Britons believe Climate Change as serious as Coronavirus and majority want Climate prioritised in economic recovery'. Retrieved from: ipsos.com/en-uk/two-thirds-britons-believe-climate-change-serious-coronavirus-and-majority-want-climate-prioritised

British Red Cross recommendation:

The British Red Cross recommend that the guidance signposts to resources on improving community engagement and resilience and reflects the importance of strong and inclusive engagement with communities.

Barriers and outreach

There are significant barriers faced by marginalised people which prevent them from engaging with statutory services – even in an emergency. As the largest independent provider of support to refugees in the UK, we see this through our services. We find that people with an insecure immigration status, including those with a pending asylum claim, can be reluctant to engage with the police, health, or other statutory services in case it results in their deportation, or impacts their asylum claim.

There is a real need for assertive outreach approaches that use accessible communication with vulnerable populations. Approaches should identify vulnerable cohorts as a first concern, seeking to understand what their specific needs are. Those in the most vulnerable situations are often those who are served the least by traditional services. This is due to both initial barriers to access and engagement, as well as the design of traditional services not meeting their needs. This should be explored further in guidance. Some examples of good practice of inclusion are the NICE guidelines for people experiencing homelessness, or campaigns to address vaccine hesitancy in some minoritised ethnic groups, age groups and socio-economic groups during the pandemic.^{13 14}

British Red Cross recommendation:

The British Red Cross recommend that the guidance explains the importance of assertive outreach for certain vulnerable groups and highlights good practice examples.

Recovery

Government guidance currently does not refer to people's needs during recovery, or more specifically, how need can develop over time. LRFs should be encouraged to think about vulnerability, as well as a community's strengths, throughout the emergency response cycle, with a greater focus on resilience building and recovery.

¹³ NICE guidelines [NG214] (2022). 'Integrated health and social care for people experiencing homelessness'. Retrieved from: [nice.org.uk/guidance/ng214/chapter/Recommendations#improving-access-to-and-engagement-with-health-and-social-care](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng214/chapter/Recommendations#improving-access-to-and-engagement-with-health-and-social-care)

¹⁴ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022). 'Community champions programme: guidance and resources'. Retrieved from: [gov.uk/government/publications/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources/community-champions-programme-guidance-and-resources)

British Red Cross (2021). 'Covid-19 vaccines: what you need to know'. Retrieved from: [redcross.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/coronavirus-vaccine](https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus/coronavirus-vaccine)

Government guidance that is used in emergencies should encourage LRFs to identify who is likely to require further or new support after the initial response, and who is likely to be made more vulnerable by the emergency in the case that the emergency becomes protracted.

In these protracted scenarios, deprivation and isolation become more significant. For example, if you are on a very low income, you might be able to physically remove yourself from harm's way, but your recovery is likely to be impacted to a greater extent if you have access to fewer resources. Similarly, somebody who could cope in the immediate aftermath of an emergency, but as time goes on, becomes increasingly vulnerable and unable to cope as their resources run out and their lack of social connections isolates them from support. We know from our international work that repeated shocks or crises can erode people's ability to cope and their resilience. Without appropriate support, this can lock them into a cycle of poverty, as they are less likely to be able to cope with the next event and will require more support. There is a need to consider 'high frequency low impact' events specifically, as over time they have a compounding effect.¹⁵

The guidance should also identify what is likely to be important to support recovery and encourage partnership working with relevant local bodies. For example, we know experiencing an emergency can, for many, result in negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing, that can be long-lasting. In these instances, working in partnership with local health bodies is crucial to ensure needs are identified and people are sign-posted to appropriate services.

British Red Cross recommendation:

The British Red Cross recommend that the guidance should consider the full emergency response cycle, specifically highlighting the need to consider vulnerabilities during the recovery phase as well as during the response.

Data sharing

One difficult aspect of a multi-agency emergency response regards data sharing between different organisations, including the VCS. Lack of clarity over which information can be shared can lead to a fragmented awareness of who is at risk and who is affected and can delay crucial interventions.

There is scope for translating the principles of current data protection legislation into concrete guidelines, with accompanying examples. Not only would this enable a more agile and human-centred response, it is likely to also help to identify people

¹⁵ The latest World Disasters Report from IFRC in 2022 which focused on the pandemic, found that "Much like COVID-19, the next crisis will have its most severe impacts on the most vulnerable; cause lost livelihoods and worse poverty; disrupt children's education; threaten everyone's mental health; and increase violence against vulnerable groups." See the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2023). 'World Disasters Report 2022 Trust, Equity and Local Action, Lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to avert the next global crisis'. Retrieved from: ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2022_IFRC-WDR_EN.0.pdf.pdf.

The previous World Disasters Report in 2020 focused on the humanitarian impacts of the climate crisis, "Disasters and conflicts themselves also play a major role in driving vulnerability and exposure to future hazards. Disasters can keep people in, or return people to, poverty and other situations of vulnerability". See the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2020). 'World Disasters Report 2020 Come Heat or High Water, Tackling the humanitarian impacts of the climate crisis together'. Retrieved from: ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/20201116_WorldDisasters_Full.pdf.

who are particularly vulnerable and allow agencies to better support those with trauma from an emergency, who we know can be retraumatized by being asked to repeatedly tell their story to different agencies.

Storms Arwen – Franklin.

The British Red Cross response was delayed by elements of vulnerable person lists being cumbersome and difficult to decipher, resulting in significant time being spent identifying individuals. Due to the protracted nature of this emergency, we also saw people's needs develop, with people becoming newly vulnerable; and as time went on all those affected became vulnerable to an extent. Clearer guidelines on sharing data in an emergency would be a positive step forward.

British Red Cross recommendation:

The British Red Cross recommend that the Cabinet Office and DCMS should liaise with the Information Commissioner's Office to provide clearer guidelines on how to manage privacy and confidentiality when sharing data in the event of an emergency. This should allow data sharing with all emergency response partners, including the VCS. These guidelines should be clear and simple, and tested as part of practice exercises. They should cover not just emergency response but also planning and recovery.