

Vulnerability in the Time of COVID-19

A SACRU concept paperⁱ

Working Group 1

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1. About this document

This document is authored by Working Group 1 of the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Research Universities (SACRU). The working group, which comprises representatives of the SACRU members, was tasked with coordinating responses to COVID-19 through research and teaching. At its initial meetings, the working group recognized that a key contribution a Catholic worldview can make to responses to COVID-19 is to focus on ‘vulnerability’. Consequently, the working group describes its task as ‘Responding through Research and Teaching to a Vulnerable World’. This document provides a conceptual framework for the task of the working group.

More importantly, however, this document is also offered to SACRU members as a way of framing the manner in which research and teaching at Catholic research universities can make a singular contribution to the world as it seeks to recover from COVID-19 and prepare for future crises. By focusing research on things that may otherwise go unseen, unheard, and unfelt, except by those whose vulnerability can make them even more invisible in times of social crisis, Catholic research universities can facilitate the kind of impact on the lives of those who most need it that lies at the heart of their mission.

2. Introduction

We are facing an increasingly vulnerable world, which is both endangered and endangering integral human developmentⁱⁱ.

The pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing conditions of human vulnerability in the area of Health and healthcare, and the response to the pandemic revealed the very high vulnerability of Social and Economic Systems. Added to the ongoing crisis of Ecosystems and Natural Resources, this created an unprecedented condition of risk for humans.

This document aims at conceptualizing a general view of human vulnerability and a vulnerable world, with particular concern to the three aforementioned areas.

The analysis occurs in three steps: (i) conceptual, by giving an overview of concepts and definitions of vulnerability; (ii) descriptive, by looking at evidence of the magnitude of concerns and worsening or improving conditions; (iii) practical, that is, the actual and possible policies and strategies in place at different levels (global-regional-national-local), especially where it is the policies themselves or lack thereof that create and exacerbate vulnerabilities.

3. Conceptualizing vulnerability

A preliminary issue is the concept of vulnerability itself. As Marcos points out,

a reflection on the etymology of the term ‘vulnerability’ will help us take a first step towards its current-day content and importance. [...] The term comes from Latin, ‘*vulnerabilis*’, a language in which the term also refers to that which is susceptible to being harmed. Equally, in many Romance languages the verb for ‘harm’ comes from Latin ‘*ferire*’, which means perforating or cutting. That is to say, the vulnerable is the perforable. In more basic terms, it has to do with an entity into which another can be inserted, which logically requires the distinction between inner and outer. The idea of functional damage is also suggested. The insertion of something external into an entity is considered to be a wound if it causes functional damage in the entity in question. The characteristics mentioned, i.e. the distinction between an interior and an exterior, as well as the functionality, exist in living beings in a paradigmatic way. Living beings have an interior and an exterior, they possess semi-permeable barriers which identify them and separate them from their environments; at the same time, however, they communicate with that environment, which makes them functional but also, and at the same time, vulnerable.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is only the first step towards a meaningful concept of vulnerability. Contemporary writers on vulnerability try to highlight vulnerability not only as being in the state of need but also having the capacity to respond. If vulnerability is only the object of concern and not the very condition for

responsiveness, we inevitably compromise any capacity for vulnerability.^{iv} Indeed, the word *vulnerable* means not only being or having been wounded, but also being able to be wounded, that is, being exposed to the other. In this sense, vulnerability is the human condition that allows me to hear, encounter, receive, or respond to the other. Vulnerability—which tells us something about our dependency—is the condition of possibility to our openness, that is, to our structural commonality.

Taking a step forward, we may argue that vulnerability *is* our nature; it is the condition for the possibility of our responding, of our being ethical. In this sense, it precedes our decision. It even precedes our conscience. Our vulnerability is our ‘answerability’: that which allows and prompts us to recognize, to respond, to communicate and, in short, to love.

In this regard, the concept of vulnerability clearly envisages frailty or weakness confronted by specific sources of risk or even confronted by the normal course of events. Simultaneously, however, the concept of vulnerability connotes dependency, openness, and responsiveness. The lack of the capacity to respond or of meaningful levels of resilience can be directly connected to the concept of vulnerability.

Once we face the issue in this way, we have to recognize that every human being, precisely *as* a living being, is necessarily vulnerable. Thus, the feature of vulnerability may be described as a basic anthropological category, which tells us something about our fragility, dependency, and ‘answerability’. Our corporeity is, indeed, the most obvious sign of this fragility, and, at the same time, of our vital subordination to individual and collective balances. As living beings, we depend both on the environment and on the complex relationships that necessarily take place with other living beings. Recall the famous ecological motto: ‘all things hang together’. In this regard, “the fundamental interdependence, richness, and diversity contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth.”^v

As human beings, we depend on each other, for the sake of the articulation of our society and its development, for the care of our diseases, for our education and work, and so on. The human being—*as* a living being—can flourish only within the framework of a relational context. In this regard, our life deals with the necessity of sharing one’s own being. With a more current word, we could say: life is interdependence, or better, mutual dependence. Nothing can change the fact that we are open beings.

The act of recognizing our own and the other’s vulnerability is transformative. In fact, in contemporary ethics, recognition is the first act of a capacious vulnerability. In a world of social structures that shape our attitudes toward gender, race, tribe, class or caste, we tend to recognize

those who are closest to us. The tendency to overlook or to neglect those further from us, particularly those who have less access to power than we do, results from the very forces of the social structures that shape us. The call to recognize the long neglected and oppressed, stemming as it does from the Scriptures (whether Dives and Lazarus, Lk 16:19-31; the Good Samaritan, Lk 10: 30-37; or the Last Judgment, Mt 25: 31-46) helps awaken us to whose vulnerability is most at stake and becomes then the constitutive first step for any ethical response.

In this regard, ‘care’ can be considered as the best response for our common vulnerability and heightened capacity to recognize, since it deals with a structural dimension that we share, that is, being ‘living beings’. As Butler highlights:

You call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness.^{vi}

This answer is, precisely, our care for the other, since we may interpret simultaneously oneself as another^{vii} and another as oneself.^{viii} From these considerations, the idea of ‘care’ as the better response to the call (of the other-as-onself) emerges.

In conclusion, we can say that it is difficult to isolate vulnerability from a multiple-concept framework (which would include, among others, notions of interdependence, openness, answerability, risk, care, and so on). Therefore, this multiplicity is best managed through careful attention—to specific contexts, situations, and circumstances—that reflects the state of knowledge in that area. In the following, we will deepen the concept of vulnerability with respect to three such areas of concern: health and healthcare; ecosystems and natural resources; and social and economic systems. Each is analyzed in three steps: conceptual, empirical, and practical.

4. Health and healthcare

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed vulnerabilities in health and healthcare on multiple fronts. In all cases the ethical tension arises between rational calculus, and the call to care and accept care that arises from the multifaceted conception of vulnerability outlined above.

At the conceptual level, extreme pressure on limited critical care resources, shortages of PPE, lockdowns of aged care facilities and prisons, and so on raise questions about how vulnerability and response are conceived. Consider ‘herd immunity’ versus ‘hard lockdown’. The former seeks to reduce future vulnerability of a collective humanity, whilst the latter addresses the present

vulnerability of those most at risk. In critical care resource allocation, vulnerability is reconceived such that it is not those who are most at risk and in need of care who are treated first but those who are most likely to respond to care who are treated first. And finally, the intersectionality of vulnerability is apparent in that those already more at risk in terms of the socioeconomic determinants of health are more intensely vulnerable in the face of both ‘herd immunity’ and ‘lockdown’ approaches and are more likely to ‘selected out’ in resource allocation decisions due to existing co-morbidities.

Empirically, at the time of writing, the virus has infected over 100 million people across the globe, and caused more than 2 million deaths. Despite the rollout of vaccines, the virus is likely to remain part of our future. New evidence is also emerging of potential long-term morbidity. Identifying and measuring these effects is important if we are to be able to respond to them. Health and aged care workers are doubly vulnerable, not only because they are at risk of contracting the virus in economically precarious circumstances, but also because they face stigma due to cases of spreading in facilities by health and aged care workers. The crisis has also exposed not only our physical vulnerability but also our psychological vulnerability as evidence of the mental health impacts of the pandemic emerges.

At the practical level, human vulnerability to power structures has been exposed. Where governments and citizens could respond quickly and with concerted and effective common effort, the spread of the virus was largely contained. Practical effectiveness of public health interventions in the future will likely depend as much on the ‘spirit of the people’ as the ‘decisiveness of authorities’. Moreover, the scope of concern must be for multiple conceptualizations of vulnerability, recognizing collective and individual dimensions, present and future dimensions. A practical outcome of the pandemic must be reaffirmation of healthcare as a *universal* human right with structures in place to guarantee it.

Finally, as human beings encroach on the few remaining wildernesses, we are especially vulnerable to emerging infectious diseases. This is a vulnerability of our own making, as is the one arising from pollution.^{ix} The future of healthcare must be tied to practical action to address our encroachment into and disrespect for the natural world. Climate change is already influencing the transport and dissemination of infectious agents, and this is only likely to increase. We become more vulnerable the longer we do not ‘take care’ of our natural world. The more vulnerable we become in this case, the less likely we will be able to respond effectively.

5. Ecosystems and natural resources

Interconnectedness and the need for a systemic point of view highlights the notion of ‘Our common home’.

Living organisms depend on their surrounding physical environment (air, soils, water), which determines the existence of specific climate and microclimate regimes, which in turn affect organisms’ abundance and diversity over time spans exceeding their individual life expectancies (generation time). Several levels of organization are recognized, from individual through to population, community and ecosystem levels. Communities in their physical setting are labelled as ecosystems and are characterized by the flux of materials and energy that they exchange with other such systems, to the point that the entire biosphere may be considered as an overarching ecosystem (the Gaia hypothesis, or our “common home” principle in *Laudato Si’*). This concept may be disputed, but it has heuristic value. The biosphere is continually affected by external inputs (e.g., solar radiation) and internal ones such as earthquakes and landscape transformations effected by humans. Local ecosystems are more or less directly impacted, and those perturbations are propagated to the rest of the biosphere, to a higher or lower extent, sooner or later. The need for a ‘systemic viewpoint’ of these interconnected phenomena is mandatory, lest one end up with a collection of unique case studies and no generalizations. An integrated social-ecological approach is needed here, with environmental sustainability as an essential goal. And, following *Laudato Si’*, living sustainably with dignity.

Although climate change has occurred periodically over the history of Earth, never before has it happened as a consequence of human activities. The empirical verification of increased atmosphere temperature and its different consequences over the globe has led to the recognition of a new geological age, the Anthropocene. This, added to human-associated changes such as land transformation and the massive spread of exotic species (including bacteria and viruses), constitute an empirical scenario in which the vulnerabilities and resilience of ecosystems to global change (climate change and emerging diseases included) can be tested. The ‘global change scenario’ constitutes the context for the diagnosis of present state and forecast future conditions of social-ecological systems, addressing the well-being of humankind (the “integral ecology” approach put forth by *Laudato Si’*).

Through their constitutions, many countries assume the responsibility of developing economically in ways that foster environmental sustainability and respect for human dignity. This is achieved by a set of laws and regulations that weigh the economic benefits versus environmental impacts of development. Commonly, an environmental baseline is challenged with the expected effects of

building and operating a project, their costs and benefits are economically assessed, and a number of mitigations, repairs, or compensation measures are proposed in order to neutralize the most damaging residual effects (negative externalities). Most of these restorations refer to individual species, habitats, or communities directly affected, much as a checklist of cause, effect and repair. Seldom is consideration given to the systemic view of the resilience capacity of ecosystems as a whole, that consists in part in the preservation of their biodiversity. By not recognizing systemic dimensions, we can lose the sight of the need to care not only for particular species or communities, but how they interact for the good of all. As we care for the dignity of individuals and the common good, so in environmental matters we need to recognize and care for the value of individual species, but also the common functioning of the whole for the good of all. This is true not only for the natural world, as something set apart, but as something of which humankind is an integral part, with all its diversity of peoples and cultures.^x

6. Social and economic systems

An increasing vulnerability of socio-economic systems is arising from the increase in income inequality that has affected most countries for decades, and the associated increase in the number of people living in poverty, even in many rich countries. The concept of poverty has evolved from concerning merely basic material needs to encompassing immaterial, cultural, educational and spiritual needs, with an increasing perception of being poor. The unequal access to natural and economic resources, which goes contrary to the principle of ‘universal destination of goods’ enshrined in the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, endangers the basis of human development and makes people vulnerable to economic or social shocks.

The COVID-19 crisis is causing a loss of economic and human resources that is worsening the position of the weakest part of the population in most countries. The policy and financial responses, aimed at protecting people, are generating an increase in indebtedness of individuals, families, companies and governments all around the world. Already before the COVID-19 crisis, we lived in an indebted world, with estimates of the global debt of companies and government that achieved a historical peak in 2019. Debts are threats and fragilities for the future that interact with the permanent factors of vulnerability like the unequal access to land and natural resources in poor countries, the unequal sharing of the benefits of innovations, the wave of new technologies possibly generating unemployment and socio-economic inequalities, and the risks associated to climate change, including natural disasters and migrations.

At present, the UN Agenda 2030 and the SDGs are the only comprehensive global governance framework addressing sustainable human development. Despite its almost universal endorsement, it represents a soft power instrument, weak in challenging the major forces of division: inequality and inadequate human protection. At the same time, the majority of countries are not putting in place significant strategies to rebalance domestic socio-economic inequalities and unequal access. Many are pursuing growth and development strategies that go in the opposite direction, thereby exacerbating socioeconomic risks and exposures to adverse events. Fraternity and the principle of social friendship, as invoked by the Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, can be the provocative reference for action in a divided, unequal, indebted, non-cooperative—and hence vulnerable—world.

7. Our commitment

In closing these observations about the call to attend to vulnerability, recognition and care in the most compelling and challenging areas of the contemporary world, we return to the Catholic university itself and, in particular, to the Strategic Alliance of Catholic Universities.

We believe that the SACRU alliance must constantly shape us to not only teach these insights well, but to live them within our own universities and this alliance. That is, the credibility of our research and teaching depends on the example of our own administrators, faculty, staff, students and trustees in how they respond to vulnerability with due recognition and care for one another.

We must meet the standards to which we are called with transparency and accountability.

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ⁱⁱ See: Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter “*Laudato Si*”, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. Marcos, “Vulnerability as a Part of Human Nature”, in: A. Masferrer, E. García-Sánchez (eds.), *Human Dignity of the Vulnerable in the Age of Rights*. Cham: Springer, 2016, pp. 29-44, p. 34.

^{iv} Please see: E.C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

^v A. Naess, “The Deep Ecology ‘Eight Points’ Revisited”, in: H. Glasser, A. Drengson (eds.), *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005, vol. X, pp. 57-66.

^{vi} J. Butler, Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26/2 (2012): 134-51, at 142.

^{vii} P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. Trans. By K. Blaamey. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1992.

^{viii} H. Venema, Oneself as Another or Another as Oneself? *Literature and Theology*, 16/4 (2002): 410-26.

^{ix} See P. Landrigan et al, 2017, “Pollution, health, and the planet: time for decisive action”, The Lancet Commission on pollution and health; EEA, 2019, Healthy environment, healthy lives: how the environment influences health and well-being in Europe, EEA Report No 21/2019/1994.

^x See C. Perrings, S. Naeem, F. Ahrestani, D. E. Bunker, P. Burkill, G. Canziani, T. Elmqvist, R. Ferrati, J. Fuhrman, F. Jaksic, Z. Kawabata, A. Kinzig, G. M. Mace, F. Milano, H. Mooney, A.-H. Prieur-Richard, J. Tschirhart & W. Weisser. “Ecosystem Services for 2020,” *Science* 330 (2010): 323-324