

# 2.7.0

## SERIES 2

Understanding  
Vulnerability & Risk



### Contents of Set

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# VULNERABILITY AND INSTITUTIONS

Vulnerability is often perpetuated through institutional constraints, either cultural norms and expectations, or governance. Identifying and addressing these constraints is critical to successfully building resilience.

### IN THIS SET YOU WILL:

- ✓ Explore the role institutions play in maintaining vulnerability in your city.

## Institutions

Institutions are the rules, laws, customs, social norms and conventions that guide, enable, and constrain people's behavior. Institutions define the range of perceived possible responses or actions in a given situation. Institutions can be formal or informal, overt or implicit. They are created to reduce uncertainty, to maintain continuity of social patterns and social order, and to make our interactions more stable and predictable.

Institutions link agents and systems, thereby mitigating or exacerbating vulnerability, by constraining or enabling access by agents to those systems. This can be seen in overt ways – who has access to education, health services, clean water supplies, labor markets. However, institutions also structure things such as:

- Who is enabled or constrained to play a role in decision-making (i.e. who is viewed as a legitimate “stakeholder”). This influences whose interests are considered in political decisions;
- The standards to which systems are designed and managed (i.e. building codes, engineering standards),

which strongly influences whether those systems will meet the needs of users;

- Pricing structures for urban services, which influences access to those services, particularly for the poor;
- Slum clearance and resettlement, which can be positive or negative based on whether it incorporates just compensation, participatory planning and governing rights; and
- Social marginalization or entitlement.

Cultural exclusion of women, the disabled, migrants and inadequate representation of the young and elderly tend to leave them more vulnerable than others, and put them particularly at risk. In assessing institutional enabling or constraining of populations, these groups should be called out explicitly.

## Characteristics of Resilient Institutions

The attributes of resilient institutions are:

- **Access:** Rights and entitlements to use key resources or access urban systems are clear and are equitably distributed;
- **Decision-making:** Decision-making processes, particularly in relation to urban development and urban system management, follow widely accepted principles of good governance, chiefly: transparency, accountability, and responsiveness (United Nations Development Program, 1997 #292); and
- **Information:** Private households, businesses, and other decision-making agents have ready access to accurate and meaningful information to enable judgments about risk and vulnerability and for assessing adaptation options.

In the following exercise you will consider vulnerable groups in your city and the institutions that contribute to perpetuating that vulnerability. Using these resilience characteristics will help identify entry points for institutional change.

