

Ad Hoc Expert Panel for the
Development of a Methodological Approach
for the Construction of the Social Vulnerability
Index (SVI)
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**REPORT ON THE AD HOC EXPERT PANEL FOR THE
DEVELOPMENT OF A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL VULNERABILITY INDEX (SVI)**

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Introduction

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (ECLAC/CDCC) convened a one-day meeting to establish an ad hoc advisory panel for the construction of a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI), 3 December 2001, in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Attending the meeting were participants from the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Department of Behavioural Science, University of the West Indies (UWI), Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES), Central Statistical Office (CSO), Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and Development (CIRD) as well as staff members of the ECLAC/CDCC Social Development Unit. The list of participants is annexed to this report.

The agenda of the meeting was discussed and adopted as follows:

1. Welcome and overview of the project
2. Presentation of the ECLAC/CDCC notions on the methodology for the construction of the SVI
3. Demographic issues as a component of social vulnerability
4. Social vulnerability in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS)
5. Recommendations for deepening the process
6. Closing

Agenda item 1:

Welcome and overview of the project

Ms. Asha Kambon, Social Affairs Officer, ECLAC/CDCC secretariat thanked participants for attending, what was effectively the second expert group meeting on the SVI. Ms. Kambon reported that since the first meeting, had been convened to discuss the entire project, consisting of the SVI and the construction of social statistical databases, the ECLAC Subregional

Headquarters for the Caribbean had held three meetings of the Ad Hoc Advisory Panel for the construction of the Social Statistical Databases (SSDBs).

Ms. Kambon highlighted the importance of developing a Social Vulnerability Index for Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and drew the attention of participants to the fact that both the OECS and the Latin America and the Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE), the Population Division of ECLAC, had been involved in research surrounding social vulnerability during the past year. In that regard the report of the Expert Meeting: International Seminar on forms of Social Vulnerability in Latin America and the Caribbean, held in Santiago, Chile, 20-21 June 2001 was distributed for information and discussion.

Ms. Kambon also took the opportunity to update the meeting on the progress of the Construction of the Social Statistical Databases which, she explained, was in the second phase of data collection, having already begun to collect data from the first six countries – Barbados, Belize, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago and Puerto Rico. She reported that the first output of this project, A Compendium of Social Statistics from the Survey of Living Conditions datasets, would be available by mid December.

Following these remarks the floor was opened for discussion. Participants indicated their support for the project components and spoke of the necessity of having comparable and accurate data from the subregion. It was pointed out that organizations with funding capacities had been asking the subregion to identify the problems encountered in the collection and analysis of data, with a view to providing the financial wherewithal for solutions to these problems. Among the problems identified was the need for the training of staff of the Central Statistical Offices (CSOs) around the subregion, as well as the need for increased use of information technology for the processing of data.

Ms. Jacquelyn Joseph, of the CARICOM Secretariat acknowledged the increasing number of initiatives that had been taking place in the subregion with regard to the collection and process of social statistics, but felt that there was a greater need for coordination of these activities. In this regard, she announced that CARICOM was prepared to assist the subregion in the mobilisation of resources. Some of the organizations and institutions that were seen as critical to the success of a coordinated approach to the collection, processing and analysis of social statistics were the UWI, CARICOM, ECLAC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB), and the OECS.

Professor Elsie Le Franc, SALISES, also called for a technical team, organized on a regional basis, to provide assistance to countries in the subregion in the processing and analysis of social data.

In this context, participants raised the issue of the lack of institutionalised training in the areas of statistics and demography. It was felt that there was a definite need to develop courses in statistics, especially on the Cave Hill and St. Augustine campuses of the UW, along the lines already established at the Mona Campus.

Agenda item 2:
Approaches to the methodology for the construction of the SVI

Ms. Linda Hewitt, Consultant to the project on the Social Vulnerability Index, presented a background paper on approaches to the creation of a methodology for the construction of a Social Vulnerability Index. In speaking to the first section of the paper, Ms. Hewitt presented an extensive literature review related to the issues of vulnerability. In this context, she highlighted previous studies on economic vulnerability as being very useful and suggested that there was a need to examine the issue of vulnerability at the national, household and individual levels. In addition to outlining the various sources from which data at these levels could be obtained, the Consultant also identified some of the issues that needed to be taken into consideration at the various levels. These included issues of empowerment in the context of communities and social groups and a focus on poverty at the household and individual levels. In this section she also outlined the approach to be taken in conceptualising vulnerability in order to construct the index measure. To this end she suggested that there were three important steps to be followed. These were:

- (a) Determine the levels (units of analysis), in which vulnerability was to be established;
- (b) Select statistics and indicators that represented and described conditions of vulnerability and provided measures of change; and
- (c) Determine the means by which these could be worked into a composite index.

This was followed by a discussion, on part two of the paper in which Ms. Hewitt presented an examination of other systems and indexes which also provided useful methodological direction for the development of the SVI.

Important to the development of a vulnerability index were the risk factors that inhibited and constrained the ability of countries to develop and benefit from opportunities that built capacity and promoted well-being, as well as to withstand or recover from adversities and their respective transmission modes. Having highlighted issues such as (1) the need to assign statistical methods to variables in order to reduce the initial number of variables that were significantly associated with conditions that induced and transmitted

vulnerability; (2) the need to standardise variables; and (3) the importance of assigning weights in order to indicate the relative strength of each variable, Ms. Hewitt presented a preliminary set of indexes and associated variables that could be used to create the composite Social Vulnerability Index.

The components of the composite index based on the conditions likely to constitute risks to social well-being were poverty, crime, natural disasters, migration, health status and social marginalization. Ms. Hewitt concluded her presentation by recommending that further work was needed for the construction of the SVI for SIDS, based on these components and the associated variables.

Agenda item 3:

Demographic issues as component of social vulnerability

Dr. Dennis Brown, UWI, presented aspects of his current work which addressed the issue of socio demographic vulnerability in the Caribbean through an examination of the ways in which demographic variables interacted with social and institutional factors/capabilities to create vulnerability. Dr. Brown reminded participants that even while demographic factors were considered as sources of risk and vulnerability in the society and economy of the Caribbean, the relationship between the social and the demographic was an iterative one, and the examination of demographic processes as a component of social vulnerability was merely to highlight one side of an ongoing interactive process.

The discussion of the paper was set within the context of efforts at development in the Caribbean and in this regard Dr. Brown pointed to the effects of structural adjustment policies and other neoliberal policies aimed at correcting 'government failure', also known as the Washington Consensus. He pointed out that paradoxically some of these policies themselves destroyed institutions that were important to the proper working of the market. It was against this background that the paper attempted to analyze the extent to which demographic processes and structures contributed to the maintenance of ignorance, poverty and inequity in Caribbean society.

The major variables in this presentation that were regarded as demographic threats included:

(a) **Lagging fertility**, in which fertility decline apparent in the wider society was not as evident among adolescents and poor women. This had placed them and their communities and households in a position where they were unable to cope with the exigencies of life;

(b) **Age structure**, looking at issues of ageing and dependency;

(c) **Migration**, both internal and external; and

(d) **Mortality**, with a focus on Human Immune-Deficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS).

The floor was opened for discussion on both presentations. The observation was made that the issue of population movement as a threat/risk to countries in the subregion needed careful consideration since it could also be viewed as beneficial. Some of the benefits of migration that were highlighted included remittances and increased skills and knowledge among return migrants.

The meeting also welcomed the attempt to develop a social vulnerability index with predictive powers at several levels. Some participants however admitted to feelings of uncertainty about using poverty as one of the components of the SVI. Consumption rather than income was one of the measures used to calculate poverty, and it was pointed out that this method had several limitations which impacted on poverty as a sensitive indicator.

Participants also discussed the several variables suggested as sub-components of the principal components of the SVI. Comments included:

(a) The need for any construction of the SVI to take into consideration the issue of intraregional migration.

(b) In relation to the use of HIV/AIDS, as an indicator of threat under the principal component of Health Status, it was suggested that other chronic diseases such as diabetes mellitus and hypertension might also be considered.

(c) Morbidity should be included as a risk variable under Health Status, because it impacted on productivity.

(d) Infant mortality rates might need to be replaced by low birth weights. The justification for this was that overall improvement in infant mortality rates due to improvements in science and technology had made this indicator less sensitive.

Other comments included suggestions that the measurement of crime as a principal component of the SVI should include crimes against the person and that the measurement of governance should be included as a sub-component of social marginalization.

The meeting agreed that a complex exercise of this nature ought to stick to the maxim of keeping the development of the SVI as simple as possible. The question to be asked in this regard was what were the maximum variables needed to keep the index simple, yet valid. Ms. Joseph of CARICOM felt that

this would depend on whether the SVI was meant to serve as a ‘stand-alone’ indicator or whether it was intended to be used with other indicators.

Agenda item 4:
Social vulnerability in the OECS subregion

Professor Le Franc, SALISES, explained that the guiding theme of the study that had been undertaken on behalf of the OECS was how to build capacity to improve competitiveness in the international environment. One of the aims of the study was to attempt to fill the gaps left by what was perceived to be the difficulties and deficiencies of using the HDI, constructed by UNDP. At the methodological levels she pointed to the questions that had been raised about the real accuracy and usefulness (at country-level) of the various indices used in the HDI. Beyond this, were also observations about the importance of including indicators that were of relevance and which were deemed to be peculiar to small island States with open economies. In this context, the presentation focused on issues associated with the development of a measurement of human development in the OECS subregion.

According to Professor Le Franc, this adjusted index had at its core, the concept of *vulnerability*, which incorporated concepts of want, defencelessness and capacity for sustained development. Apart from vulnerability, however, Dr. Le Franc noted that any adjusted indices must also speak to issues associated with resilience and sustainability in threatened environments.

During the presentation, Professor Le Franc outlined some of the variables associated with each of these three basic dimensions of the concept mentioned before, and spoke to some of the challenges involved in the construction of the indicators needed to develop the composite indexes. She concluded the presentation by giving examples of ways in which the final indexes would measure the degree of exposure, as well as the degree of resilience that selected countries possessed. Professor Le Franc also presented the results obtained when the indexes were applied to some of the countries that were used in the study.

She concluded by bemoaning the lack of robust data in the subregion and suggested that a team of experts be given the task of bringing the data sets in the subregion up to standard.

Agenda item 5:
Discussion and recommendations for deepening the process

The participants congratulated Professor Le Franc on her presentation and acknowledged the great effort that had gone into the study. Participants highlighted the areas of commonality between the ECLAC/CDCC work on the construction of the SVI and the measurement of human development in the OECS subregion, although the two had different objectives.

Ms. Jacquelyn Joseph of CARICOM questioned whether a SVI was needed in the context of the study that was done by SALISES on behalf of the OECS. This viewpoint received support from some participants in the meeting. She also noted that the guiding theme of building capacity to improve competitiveness in the subregion was the right approach, and one for which she was in full agreement.

Some participants expressed the view that an adjusted HDI and the proposed SVI were substantially different. On the one hand, it was noted, the adjusted HDI had descriptive value while, on the other, the SVI was intended to have predictive value. Participants were reminded of the notion which suggested that the SVI should result in a measure of proneness to crisis (Sen).

Ms. Joseph congratulated the ECLAC/CDCC secretariat on the collaborative approach with which it had undertaken the task of developing an approach for a methodology for the construction of an SVI and expressed a desire to see such processes continue.

Agenda item 6:
Closing

Ms. Kambon thanked participants for having taken the time to attend the meeting and assured them of the high value placed on their input to the progress of the project. She assured them that it was ECLAC's intention to continue to deepen the collaborative process and looked forward to their continued support, throughout the life of the project.

She wished those who had travelled from outside of Trinidad and Tobago a safe onward journey and the meeting ended with the usual exchange of courtesies.

Annex I

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