

Understanding the interplay between structural and systemic vulnerability: the case of migrant agricultural workers during the Covid-19 pandemic

Commentary No. 10 of the [MigResHub](#) at the Migration Policy Centre, RSCAS, European University Institute

“If I have to select one sentence to describe the state of the world, I would say we are in a world in which global challenges are more integrated, and the responses are more and more fragmented. And, if these are not reversed, it is a recipe for disaster” António Guterres, UN Secretary-General

Disasters and emergencies, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, are known to expose and exacerbate the vulnerabilities of our societal systems. In this short commentary, we propose to distinguish between *structural vulnerability*, defined as being created within a given system by the interactions of different social, economic and cultural conditions and *systemic vulnerability*, that emerges out of the complex net of relationships between societal systems. We take the case of the migrant agricultural workers living in informal settlements in Southern Italy to exemplify this distinction and to show the interplay between these two forms of vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The notion of vulnerability

Disaster Studies have long advocated that disasters result from the interaction between pre-existing vulnerability and an external hazard. As such, understanding the mechanisms that create the vulnerability, which is one of the components of risk, plays a primary role for addressing and reducing disaster risk (e.g., Wisner et al, 2003). Migration Studies has been characterized by a dualism between micro/meso-level and macro-level conceptualisations of vulnerability. The former seeks to identify factors that potentially provide protection against the negative effects of risky situations, i.e. factors that may increase migrants’ ‘resilience’ to risky situations (Bradby et al., 2019). In contrast, macro-level conceptualisations focused on the upstream structural drivers of vulnerability are typically associated with an emphasis on protective factors at a political level (Chase, 2016).

Within the context of Covid-19, the combination of perspectives on vulnerability from Disaster and Migration Studies can generate useful insights about the complex implications of the current crisis.

From a local to a global view of risk and vulnerability

The living conditions experienced by many migrant agricultural workers exemplify the mechanisms through which their vulnerability is produced on a daily basis. In Capitanata, located in the province of Foggia in Southern Italy - a key area of tomato production in Italy- migrant workers, often without the legal status to reside and work in the country, live in dire conditions in informal settlements with no Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, and under the supervision of “caporali”, the illegal intermediaries that manage migrant agricultural workers. These precarious conditions affect also migrants’ access to healthcare. The described situation is common to several other areas in Italy, Europe and north America (Spencer, S., & Triandafyllidou, 2020) and it is emblematic of what we call “structural vulnerability”.

The pandemic has exposed not only these preexisting vulnerabilities, making the migrant population particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of the virus (Guadagno, 2020), but also the vulnerability of the entire food production system (Ryerson University, 2020), as well as of the other linked societal systems (e.g., health and migration governance systems). The United Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) has outlined that the interconnected nature of modern societies’ systems “create vulnerability on multiple spatial scales (from local to global) and across different timescales (from immediate to weekly to monthly to decadal and beyond)” (Gordon and Williams, 2020). Thus, UNDRR calls for understanding the dynamic nature of systemic risk (UNDRR, 2019). Aligning with this vision, we argue that

there is a need to examine how the vulnerabilities created at local and system level (structural vulnerability) interact and influence those of connected systems, producing what we define as ‘systemic vulnerability’. We also advocate that crises, by turning the latent into the manifest, trigger the interlinkages between structural and systemic weaknesses, surfacing the risk of failures at systemic level. Notably structural and systemic vulnerability differs from individual vulnerability in that the latter refers to the vulnerability of an individual that comes from his/her belonging to a certain group considered as “vulnerable” (e.g., an ethnic or linguistic minority). In our understanding, structural vulnerability has instead to do with what happens within a system, intended as a sector (e.g., the agricultural sector, the migration governance sector) or a geographical area (e.g., the Capitanata) and with the “structural” conditions that make it more susceptible to adverse shocks. Finally, systemic vulnerability emerges at the intersection between systems and exists because modern societal systems are characterized by multiple links and feedback loops (Faulkner and Sword-Daniels, 2021).

In the case of migrant agricultural workers in the Capitanata, the structural vulnerabilities of the agricultural, migration and health sector in Italy and of the geographical area (Southern Italy) influenced and reinforced each other. The resulting systemic vulnerability generated, when the Covid19 emergency hit, the risk of a systemic failure with potentially devastating ripple effects across systems (e.g. shortage of agricultural workers, increase of incontrollable disease clusters, food shortage). These potential effects were mitigated through ad hoc projects (e.g., mobile clinics in informal settlements for Covid19 monitoring) or policy measures (e.g., regularization of migrant agricultural workers) (Tagliacozzo et al. 2020).

Connecting the pieces: the need for an integrated approach

What are the implications of this argument for migrant workers and the agricultural sector? Firstly, it highlights the need to understand the weaknesses of the individual components of the food production chain, starting from its bottom level: the migrant agricultural workers. As outlined by Bettina Rudloff (2020), “not only has critical infrastructure been overlooked in discussions about migrant workers (Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs, 2020), but human capital, including migrant workers, has also

been largely overlooked in discussions about critical infrastructure” (p.3). Secondly, we also require a better understanding of the interrelations and reciprocal influences between the vulnerability of migrant workers and that of farm companies and the food distribution industry. This implies overcoming fragmentation and siloes between actors in the food supply chain (Mian et al., 2020). Finally, we need to examine better the interactions between systems – even those which seem less connected with the food and agricultural system. Strategies and policies should be devised that tackle the vulnerabilities lying at the intersection between systems, and that allow for a cross-country, cross-crisis and cross-systems governance (see, also Haynes, 2020).

These analyses should be supported by evidence produced in a way that overcomes existing disciplinary and sectoral silos. Evidence emerging from an integrated and whole of community approach is critical to navigating through these difficult times and the challenges we have ahead, and to build resilient systems in the future.

Vulnerability and resilience: two interrelated concepts

In this commentary, we have focused on the notion of ‘systemic vulnerability’. MigResHub focuses primarily on ‘systemic resilience’ (e.g., Haynes, 2020; Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs, 2020; Rudolf, 2020). Thus, as a final note, we want to explain the relationship between these two concepts. Vulnerability and resilience are inherently interrelated: although the absence of the former does not imply the presence of the latter, a vulnerable system is, speaking in general terms, less able to absorb and recover from external shocks; it is therefore, less resilient. However, the relationship between resilience and vulnerability is complex and debated: some consider the two concepts as opposite, others note that a system can be, at the same time, both vulnerable and resilient (Manyena, 2006). Manyena et al. (2011) suggest that resilience is the ability of a system not only to bounce back (e.g., to pre-disaster levels), but also to bounce forward, namely to reduce underlying mechanisms that created disaster risk, including vulnerability drivers.

Finally, we acknowledge that the vulnerability and resilience of single components do not necessarily equal those of the whole system, or of the system of systems. As suggested by Anderson, Poeschel, and Ruhs (2020), preserving the resilience of the system may come at the expense of that of its individual sub-components. Thus,

there is the need for any analysis to start from a human-centred approach (Kuptsch, 2020) that takes human dignity and rights as a baseline for understanding complex interconnections between systems.

This commentary is based on an article recently published in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, titled “The interplay between structural and systemic vulnerability during the Covid-19 pandemic: migrant agricultural workers in informal settlements in Southern Italy”. The article is authored by Serena Tagliacozzo and Lucio Pisacane (National Research Council of Italy) and Majella Kilkey (University of Sheffield). Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1857230>

Serena Tagliacozzo, PhD is a Research Fellow and Evaluation Specialist at the Italian National Research Council with expertise in disaster risk management. Lucio Pisacane, PhD is a Senior Researcher at the Italian National Research Council with expertise in agricultural labour market and migration. Majella Kilkey is a Professor of Social Policy at the University of Sheffield (UK) and her work lies at the intersections between migration and families / care / gender / ageing / geopolitical transformations.

Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.

The Migrants and Systemic Resilience Hub ([MigResHub](#)) facilitates research and debates on how migrant workers affect the resilience of essential services during the Covid-19 pandemic and similar shocks in the future. MigResHub is a joint initiative of the EUI’s Migration Policy Centre (MPC) and Migration Mobilities Bristol (MMB) at the University of Bristol.

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