



Call for Papers – Vulnerable Societies: Risks and Responses

Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association 2024
University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, Basel (MuttENZ),
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To say that we live in times of uncertainty seems like a sociological truism. However, in recent times, societies around the world have been shaken by an extraordinary accumulation of acute and persistent crises and catastrophes with global repercussions, including the COVID-19 pandemic; the war in the Ukraine; the accelerating effects of climate change manifest in heat waves, droughts, and floods; disruptions of supply chains and energy shortages; and the massive resurgence of hunger and food insecurity, to name but a few. Each of these crises presents major social, political, economic, and ecological challenges in themselves. Taken together, they generate a heightened sense of overall vulnerability. Against this backdrop, “vulnerability” has become a popular term in professional, public and political discourses. It is associated with a wide range of physical, social, economic, and cultural conditions and not only applied to human actors but to technical, ecological, economic, political, and societal systems alike. Beyond its descriptive function the term is most often also used prescriptively. Diagnosing vulnerability is inevitably linked to moral and political calls to action to prevent and redress harm and social injustices. To identify a social group as vulnerable implies a special need for protection and support; fragility in systems necessitates stabilizing and preventive measures in the long run. Debates on vulnerability thus comprise its opposites like resilience, adaptation, robustness, preparedness, security, risk management etc.

In the academic world, vulnerability is discussed across various disciplines, from the medical and technical sciences to the humanities and social sciences. However, the broad appeal of the concept constitutes also its weakness. Its popularity and wide application inside and outside academia provoke criticisms of inflationary usage, a lack of theoretical rigor and the functionalization of the term in political discourse. In a way, rather than a well-defined concept vulnerability and its counter-terms may be regarded as terms in a multi-faceted conceptual field. On the other hand, its conceptual vagueness and expansive usage invites fruitful inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. In sociology, vulnerability is still not established as a main theoretical concept on a par with core notions of social theory like, for example, risk or uncertainty. What, then, is the specific perspective and contribution of sociology to the study of vulnerabilities?

The congress of the Swiss Sociological Association is dedicated to critically exploring the theoretical and empirical significance of this concept in sociology. Furthermore, it aims to address the political and practical implications of sociological studies of vulnerability and the role of sociological expertise in combating vulnerabilities.

With this call we invite sociologists and members of related disciplines to contribute to this debate. We welcome proposals for plenary sessions and workshops from theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives on the following broad questions and further topics:

- How does vulnerability relate to associated and well-established theoretical concepts such as uncertainty, risk, crisis, or precarity or to its counter-terms such as resilience, agency, adaptation, and the like? What is its significance and potential for sociological theory?
- What are the empirical forms, causes, dynamics and consequences of human and non-human vulnerability and fragility?
- How do individuals, groups, organizations, social movements, governments, supranational organizations etc. understand and respond to various vulnerabilities of diverse (human) actors or systems and with which effects? What are the personal, collective, institutional, infrastructural resources that enable individuals, groups, or systems of any kind to cope with hazards, shocks and stress?
- What are the functions of concepts like vulnerability, resilience and related terms in public, media and political discourses?
- Methodological issues regarding the empirical operationalization and measurement, including the ethical questions arising in the study of vulnerable populations.

Other contributions relevant to the research networks of the Swiss Sociological Association are also welcome.

Sessions can be held in German, French, and English. Please submit your proposals until **17 September 2023** online at [SSA Congress Plenary](#) or [SSA Congress Workshop](#).

- **Plenary sessions with maximum three speakers:** Please provide the plenary title and a plenary abstract of max. 6000 characters, 3-4 keywords, presentations titles and names of speakers and the plenary organizers' institutional affiliation. If the proposal is accepted, the organizers will be asked to submit the complete session program until 31 December 2023.
- **Workshop sessions:** max. 2000 characters including workshop title, abstract (as call for papers for workshop contributions), 3-4 keywords as well as workshop organizers' affiliation and contact information. If the workshop proposal is accepted, individual contributions to the workshops can be submitted until 05.01.2024. The workshop organizers are responsible for the selection; they will be asked to submit the complete workshop program until 26.01.2024.

Information on acceptance/rejection of proposals will be communicated by mid-October 2023. For further information see: fhnw.ch/ssa