Addressing, Understanding and Measuring Vulnerability:  
When and why does it matter?

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to raise some questions regarding the concept of vulnerability and the use of economic strengthening interventions in the context of family separation

The issue of “vulnerability” – how it is defined, measured and used in program design – is very relevant to the role that economic strengthening interventions plays in preventing family separation and the reunification and reintegration of separated children back into their families and communities. Stakeholders working in this field universally agree that poverty and the lack of access to sustainable economic livelihoods are among the most significant factors contributing to children being separated from their families, and obstacles preventing the successful reunification of separated children back into their families. Yet, there is an overwhelming consensus that economic poverty, while a major factor, is not the only factor. There are other risk factors that contribute to the vulnerability of families to separation.

Questions:

1) What is meant by “vulnerability” in the context of family separation and economic strengthening? Is “vulnerability” the same as “risk factors” when addressing family separation? Is there a conceptual distinction, and if so, how might the distinction be addressed programmatically?

2) How is economic vulnerability measured and what indicators do we use? What are the other dimensions of vulnerability that should be analyzed in the context of family separation and reintegration?

3) What are the methods and approaches for conducting assessments? Do they change for different contexts? What are the time, costs and levels of effort required? Is it always essential to assess vulnerability when designing a program to preventing child separation and supporting reunification/reintegration?

4) How can vulnerability data be used in research, programming and otherwise? Examples include identification of beneficiaries (targeting), identification of economic strengthening interventions for a particular context?

5) What are the limitations of vulnerability assessments? What are challenges that are often faced when collecting vulnerability data? Are there risks to conducting vulnerability assessment?

6) What are the benefits of targeting participants using poverty and vulnerability criteria? Does this ensure that programs would most efficiently reach and impact the population? What are some negative consequences of targeting including the cost, possibility of missing eligible beneficiaries, potential for stigma and discrimination (Adato and Basset 2008)?
7) What are the different packages of services available and appropriate for different levels or types of vulnerability (e.g. extreme poverty versus below the poverty line) in the context of child separation and reintegration?

8) To whom do we provide the services? Whom do we leave out? At what point do you wean beneficiaries from support?

9) When applying the graduation model, how do we track the progress of households and gauge changes in vulnerability? How do we take into account various shocks (such as illnesses, hospitalizations, natural disasters and death)?

10) Can we identify a framework or tool for understanding and analyzing vulnerability – who, how and when to target in the context of preventing family separation and reintegration of separated children?

11) What do we know about families with “vulnerabilities” who are not at risk of separation?

References

