

Has Human Security Disappeared from the International Agenda?

Written by Conor Heffernan

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CONOR HEFFERNAN, JAN 17 2014

“The world cannot be at peace unless people have security in their daily lives”[1]

UN Human Development Report, 1994

Understanding human security as “safety from chronic threats and protection from the sudden hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life,” this paper proposes that while it could be argued that human security as a concept and framework for practices has largely disappeared from the international agenda, such a viewpoint ignores the work done by various agencies in the name of human security and the relatively recent resurgence of interest internationally in human security. The reasons for the apparent decline of human security are examined—namely conceptual ambiguities, framework difficulties, and the apparent misuse and failure of human security interventions by international institutions. However, the advances of the human security approach and the recent resurgence of interest in human security in the UN are examined to argue that the ideals of human security remain and are active.

When discussing human security’s conceptual problems, the most contentious issue surrounds its definition. While this paper uses a simple definition, scholars and policymakers rarely agree on what constitutes human security.[2] Human security’s 1994 inception by the UN Human Development Report divided human security into several categories ranging from economic to environmental security.[3] Such a sweeping definition caused problems for scholars. Khong argued that by prioritizing everything, human security has prioritised nothing due to the difficulty it creates in dealing specific issues.[4] Once an issue is ‘securitized,’ it gains priority among policymakers.[5] If everything is prioritised, what gets preference?

In response to criticism, human security advocates have grouped the original definition into two categories: namely, a ‘narrow’ view, constituting ‘freedom from fear’ (violence), and a ‘broad’ view, constituting ‘freedom from want’ (economic and personal).[6] Whilst significant convergence between these two groupings exist, scholars are still faced with difficulty prioritising ‘freedom from fear’ or ‘freedom from want.’[7] Human security’s conceptual difficulty has perhaps contributed to its apparent decline, as agents are unsure of its meaning. Brahimi, a former UN official, allegedly told Martin and Owen, “I don’t use the term human security because I don’t know exactly what I mean, and I worry that someone will come up and contradict me.”[8]

Another conceptual issue related to human security’s apparent decline is its radical nature. Throughout the Cold War, the international community’s security conception was embedded within the Nation-State model, wherein the primary security objective was related to defending State sovereignty. States exercised a dual role as internal provider of citizens’ security and as an external source of security threats to others. In line with this approach, the international community adhered resolutely to the principles of sovereignty when approaching intra-State conflicts where ‘even in cases of severe human rights abuses, most states formally rejected the idea that states could intervene in other states.’[9] Alternatively, human security aimed to empower individuals by providing a two-part support system, comprised of both the State and, should individual security be compromised, the international community.[10] In effect, State security became one option among many others, and State sovereignty became flexible.[11]

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This concept has provoked the ire of commentators, such as Chappuis, who argued that taking human security seriously would require a total change in the international community's structure.[12] Others have argued that human security violates national sovereignty. It could be postulated that human security makes intervention following human security abuses seem apolitical, when intervening in another State's affairs is fundamentally a political act. In his dismissive review of human security as '*The Dog that Didn't Bark*', Chandler argued that human security provides stronger States an excuse to intervene in the sovereignty of others.[13] Thus, critics of human security have presented the concept as a neo-imperial tool and attempted to tarnish it, thereby contributing to the apparent decline of human security. Whether this is the case will be examined, but firstly this paper deals with framework disagreements stemming from the conceptual difficulties.

Understanding framework as "a set of ideas or facts that provide support for something," this paper examines human security frameworks in international relations and how they have contributed to its apparent disappearance.[14] There are two frameworks of note: frameworks built on 'freedom from fear' and 'freedom from want.' Frameworks built on 'freedom from fear' have perhaps been the most effective and popular approach among States. Historically, Canada has been at the forefront of such an approach, but in 2005, a UN initiative labelled 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) was established, which broadened its advocacy base. The essence of R2P is that sovereignty is not a right, but entails responsibilities for States to provide protection and security for their citizens.[15] In many senses, therefore, R2P replaced human security as a framework based on 'freedom from fear.' The gross misuse of R2P, which will be discussed later, perhaps led to a growing uneasiness about using such a framework.

The second policy framework adopted by States has been based on 'freedom from want.' Traditionally, Norway and Japan have been great proponents of such an approach, but the EU and the UN have also been involved.[16] This framework attempts to extend the 'threat' agenda to include hunger, disease, and natural disasters, as they are seen as inseparable concepts in addressing human insecurity.[17] However, such a framework suffers from many of human security's conceptual weaknesses. Where do States intervene first? What takes precedence, a famine or tsunami? Compared to R2P, a framework based on 'freedom from want' appears, at first glance, to be much more abstract and fluid a concept, something which is of little use to policymakers. Another issue for many commentators is that a great deal of funding is required for 'freedom from want' frameworks. Indeed, a UN initiative to develop regions has been primarily funded only by Japan for over a decade.[18] This perhaps makes such a framework at times unattractive for States.

Implementation of both frameworks by international institutions has, unfortunately, left much to be desired. The current UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti, which began in 2004, elucidates many of the problems of human security frameworks in international relations.[19] The mission was mandated with a comparatively narrow interpretation of human security, primarily based on ensuring 'freedom from fear.' [20] Emphasis was on creating a secure domestic environment, explicitly for the purpose of enabling human rights, preventing "the loss of human life," and restoring national "peace and security." Yet the mission was also tasked with improving Haitian economic conditions. [21] Thus, the mission exemplifies a neat combination of a narrow 'freedom from fear' framework influenced by 'freedom from want' concerns.

The results to the framework were mixed. Muggah argued that the mission's beginning was seen by some to represent a 'new reality' based on human security peacekeeping.[22] Unfortunately, the UN's human security concept appeared to be well ahead of the realities on the ground. Haiti's security situation deteriorated after UN intervention and, eventually, it was decided that a human security framework was not sufficient to deal with on the ground violence.[23] Put simply, a more traditional peacekeeping method was needed. While the Haitian mission was not a complete failure for human security, it did expose its weakness i.e. that it could not stand alone without a traditional security force.

While the UN human security intervention in Haiti is seen as benign in intent, NATO's 2011 Libyan incursion was viewed as anything but. NATO undertook military intervention in terms of human security ('R2P'), citing Libyan dictator Gaddafi's planned air attacks upon civilians.[24] Thus, it was a 'freedom from fear' concern. However, "having crippled Libyan air capabilities," NATO continued targeting Gaddafi's compound, prompting critics to note, "the boundaries between protecting civilians and pursuing regime change became increasingly blurred." [25]

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Depicting human security as a neo-imperialist tool, critics alleged that, contrary to the principles of human security, diplomatic means had not been exhausted prior to NATO's deployment.[26] Whilst Gaddafi's genocide language prior to intervention indicated that mass violence against civilians was imminent, sustained NATO attacks against Gaddafi cast human security interventions in a negative light, as it appeared that the West used human security as a smokescreen for intervention.[27] Perhaps, most damaging were reports that NATO was responsible for twice as many civilian deaths as Gaddafi.[28] This was not the first time human security language had been used to overstep boundaries. Gilmore noted that the US employed human security language in its 'War on Terror' even though the 'War' was anathema to human security.[29] Human security as a concept has, perhaps 'disappeared' from political discourse because it has been manipulated to serve specific personal agendas. Interestingly, in 2010 the Canadian Government effectively blacklisted 'human security' from its communications, perhaps indicating the tarnished image of the concept.[30]

Has human security – '*The Dog that Didn't Bark*' – disappeared? The answer appears to be no. Those who argue otherwise ignore the vast advances made in peacekeeping, thanks to human security such as: the Ottawa Treaty (banning anti-personnel mines), the Rome Treaty (creating the International Criminal Court), the UN Security Council resolutions on Children and Armed Conflict and Women, Peace and Security, and, of course, R2P.[31] While human security is not as popular a concept as in its heyday in the early 1990s, its essence has continued through a number of political institutions. Dealing with 'freedom from want,' the UN Trust Fund for Human Security has funded over 200 projects since 1999.[32] This has included a vast array of issues from Cambodian drug counselling to supporting Sudanese agricultural investment. Dealing with 'freedom from fear,' the EU has largely built its common foreign policy around issues of human security.[33] And, while discourses on human security in the UN were scarce for many years, a 2012 debate in the UN focused on coming to agreement over what human security constitutes.[34] Whether this will be successful is yet unknown, however, its presence indicates that human security has not disappeared from the international agenda.

The Syrian Crisis and debates over intervention during 2013 marked an interesting example of the longevity of human security. In late August and September 2013, Western military strikes were contemplated in response to alleged chemical weapons use against civilians near Damascus i.e. a violation of human security. While negotiations over military intervention were eventually vetoed, the Syrian Regime cooperated with the international community to destroy its chemical weapons. This may seem like a small victory, until one recalls McCormack's assertion that previously 'even in cases of severe human rights abuses, most states formally rejected the idea that states could intervene in other states.'[35] It appears human security has allowed at least some cooperation between States in trying to lessen the damage of internal strife. This is progress. While human security was not invoked as a concept during the Syrian Crisis, its ideals certainly were.

This paper proposed that while it could be argued that human security as a concept and framework for practices has largely disappeared from the international agenda, such a viewpoint ignores the work done by various agencies in the name of human security and the relatively recent resurgence of interest in human security. The reasons for the apparent decline of human security were examined before the paper went on to examine the advances of the human security approach, along with recent resurgence of interest in human security internationally. While critics such as Chandler may view the relative disappearance of the term human security as a victory, the victory appears to have been pyrrhic. The ideals of human security appear prevalent in the intentions of many international actors.

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