

# A Critical Evaluation of the Concept of Human Security

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LUKE JOHNS, JUL 5 2014

*"...the world is entering a new era in which the very concept of security will change – and change dramatically. Security will be interpreted as: security of people, not just territory. Security of individuals, not just nations. Security through development, not through arms. Security of all the people everywhere – in their homes, in their jobs, in their streets, in their communities, in their environment."*<sup>[1]</sup>

'Human security' is one of the more salient neologisms that arose from the ashes of the Cold War. The logic behind its introduction and advocacy was clear: the realist, state-centric paradigm of security that championed the primacy of territorial integrity over that of the individual, seemed increasingly anachronistic in a world where states no longer faced the existential threat that nuclear stand-off had perpetuated (UN, 1994; Jolly and Ray, 2006: 3-4; Debiel and Werthes, 2006). Instead, the referent of security should be the individual. Inter-state warfare had all but ceased to exist, but civil and ethnic wars ravaged populations. These 'new wars' – a product of globalization and the emergence of intransigent nationalisms – destroyed infrastructure, involved the intentional targeting of non-combatants, further worsened and proliferated conditions of poverty, and promoted and drove criminal activities and illegal economies (Kaldor, 1999, 2007: 6). Thus, the way to secure international security was seen to be through the merging of development and security—placing the emancipation and development of the individual at the centre of the security agenda (UN, 2004: viii). It is important to note, however, that the state – in league with development agencies, NGOs and civil society groups – was still seen as the most effective guarantor of this security.[2]

Divided in to three sections, the aim of this essay is to critically evaluate the concept of human security: Is it simply "hot air", as Roland Paris (2001) has suggested? Does its conceptual ambiguity work in its favour, or does this ambiguity render it ineffective in analysis and policymaking? Is it little more than a catchy slogan that allows states to tick the 'good international citizen' box of foreign policy without adapting theirs, as Ken Booth (2007) argues? Section one will briefly trace the development and early evolution of the concept, assessing its central tenets. Section two will explore the claims of the concept's advocates, evaluating the successes attributed to the adoption and promulgation of the term. Finally, before concluding, section three will analyse the rebuttals presented by those scholars who remain sceptical of its conceptual integrity, operationalization, and potential to invoke lasting change in international politics.

### What is Human Security?

Although the definition of human security is subject to much debate,[3] its first, most-commonly cited usage came in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) 1994 *Human Development Report*. In this report, a whole chapter was devoted to the 'New Dimensions of Human Security', characterising the term as "a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced," as well as stating that human security was *universal*; its components *interdependent*; based upon *preventative*, rather than reactionary measures; and intrinsically *people-centred* (UN, 1994: 22-23). Defining human security as "safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression" and "protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life," the UNDP broadened the conceptualisation of security. This moved it away from state-centric approach that had prevailed to encompass seven key individualcentric components: economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security (Ibid., 24-25). At its core, it returned to the two equally open-ended foundational

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freedoms as outlined in the 1945 adoption of the UN Charter: “freedom from want” and “freedom from fear”. Thus, the concept itself was designed with the ideas of inclusiveness and the desire for ambiguity in-built. “Like other fundamental concepts,” the report states, “...human security is more easily identified through its absence than its presence. And most people instinctively understand what security means” (Ibid., 23).

Further to the *Human Development Report*, the 2001 establishment of the Commission on Human Security (CHS) was seen as a significant development in the concept’s relatively short history. Chaired by former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Sadaka Ogata and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, the CHS was established to:

“(i) mobilize support and promote greater understanding of human security,

(ii) develop further the concept as an operational tool, and

(iii) outline a concrete action plan for its implementation.”[4]

Chapter 1 of its final report – entitled *Human Security Now* – reaffirmed the goal of human security:

“to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment... protecting fundamental freedoms... protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations” (CHS, 2003).

More importantly, in the face of continued academic scrutiny on the open-endedness of the concept, it reiterated the necessity for a dynamic conceptualisation of human security, stating: “What people consider to be “vital” – what they consider to be “of the essence of life” and “crucially important” – varies across individuals and societies. That is why any concept of human security must be dynamic” (Ibid.) Human security remained malleable, focused specifically on the individual and easily adapted to various cultural specificities.

## An Individual-Centric, Coalition-Inducing, Emancipatory Project?

Although conceptual ambiguity is a key point of academic debate in the human security field, proponents of the human security paradigm argue that its inclusive, broad, and holistic nature represent its greatest strengths. As human security has prompted an intersection between development and security, King and Murray (2001: 589) have described the birth of the concept as a “unifying event” – it works as an “organizing concept” that enables the development of broad coalitions around specific ‘security’ issues without the traditional strains of narrowed, state-centric definitions of security that have previously hindered multi-party cooperation. In a similar vein, both Jolly and Ray (2006: 13-14) and Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy (2007: 10) advocate a holistic approach to human security definition, arguing that the post-Cold War world presents such a plethora of security problems, where the sources of threats vary widely both within and across states, that a flexible, broad definition of human security is the only viable option. “Not only does a holistic approach draw different specialisms together in the quest to understand better the interconnections between diverse aspects of human insecurity,” writes Ewan, “it may also bolster co-operation between international agencies in the fields of security, development and human rights.” (Ewan, 2007: 184; see also Uvin, 2004)

One of the theories that underlies the advocacy of a holistic approach to human security is that broadness facilitates coalitions, which, in turn, allow previously neglected issues to gain greater saliency in the international sphere. This can either be through increased funding or the elevation of particular issues to the realm of “high politics” (Franceschet, 2006: 33; Shinoda, 2004).[5] For example, the adoption of a human security narrative is often cited as a key driver behind the campaign to ban landmines in the 1990s. Culminating in the Ottawa Treaty (or Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction),[6] the ban was ultimately attributed to the endeavors of “middle powers”, particularly Canada, unifying around an issue previously “off the table” under the ‘traditional’ bounds of security.[7] Similarly, both Franceschet (2006) and Bruggeman (2008: 59-66), amongst others, attribute the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002 to the prevailing human security agenda. Again praising the Canadian promulgation of the human security narrative,

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Robinson (2001: 174) describes the ICC Statute as “a weaving together of idealism and pragmatism, demonstrating that human security and national security are not mutually exclusive,” attesting to human security’s conceptual malleability.

Finally, as MacFarlane and Khong (2006; 229) have noted:

“construing the threat faced by innocent civilians caught in civil wars or those targeted for genocide by their ethnic enemies as “security” issues increases, in theory, the possibility of action by the UN.”

Through the development of the interconnected principle of ‘the responsibility to protect’ – similarly individual-centric in its mandate – and blurring the lines between domestic and international, the human security discourse is able to challenge the previously unquestioned nature of state sovereignty and the norm of non-intervention that had prevailed (Ibid.). As the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) concluded in its 2001 report entitled *The Responsibility to Protect*:

“Human security is indeed indivisible. There is no longer such a thing as a humanitarian catastrophe occurring ‘in a faraway country of which we know little’... In an interdependent world, in which security depends on a framework of stable sovereign entities, the existence of fragile states, failing states, states who through weakness or ill-will harbour those dangerous to others, or states that can only maintain internal order by means of gross human rights violations, can constitute a risk to people everywhere.” (ICISS, 2001: 5)

Thus, the concept of human security not only emphasizes the individual as the referent of international security through the merging of the previously independent issues of development and security, it makes the security of “those over there” an international matter and inextricably linked to “us over here”. “The link between human insecurity and international insecurity has been invigorated” (MacFarlane and Khong, 2006: 230).

## The False Promise of Human Security?

The relative successes attributed to the human security narrative have not gone unnoticed, even amongst the most fervent of its critics. However, human security has come under a great deal of criticism amongst scholars in a variety of fields, ranging from global governance to peacekeeping (Paris, 2001, 2004; Duffield and Waddell, 2004, 2006; Krause, 2004; Chandler, 2008). The most prominent criticisms relate particularly to its conceptual ambiguity and lack of a precise definition.[8] Paris (2001: 88) has argued that human security can be likened to other equally vague concepts like “sustainable development” – “everyone is for it, but few people have a clear idea of what it means.” Similarly, Newman (2004, 2010: 82) refers to it as normatively attractive but analytically weak.” Even Lakhdar Brahimi, former special representative to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Haiti, and chair of the UN Panel on Peacekeeping, is noted as saying: “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.”<sup>[9]</sup> By broadening the concept of security to encompass anything from environmental degradation and pollution to homelessness and unemployment, Khong (2001: 232) argues that we end up prioritizing everything. If everything is prioritized, then, by definition, nothing is.[10] Going even further, Krause (2004: 367) has referred to human security in its broadly-defined form as “a loose synonym for ‘bad things that can happen’,” and both Buzan (2004) and Martin and Owen (2010) make the important point that defining human security broadly under its seven component parts means little, if anything, distinguishes the term from human rights. This in turn poses a practical dilemma for policy-makers charged with the allocation of already scarce resources.

A different line of criticism comes from those who contend that states have been able to co-opt the human security narrative to further their own ends, augmenting hegemonic interests and narratives rather than challenging or transforming them (Black, 2006: 13). Instead of having genuine commitment to the emancipation of the most vulnerable and impoverished, Suhrke (1999: 265-276) has argued that non-military “middle powers” such as Norway, Japan, and Canada have used the promulgation of the human security agenda to cement their own places in the international state system. Taking a critical perspective on the development of the concept, Booth (2007: 324, 327) argues in a very Foucauldian manner that human security has taken the image of “the velvet glove on the iron

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hand of power,” criticising how “the cold monster of the sovereign state has appropriated human security in order to help entrench its own.” It doesn’t give a voice to the previously ‘marginalized’, as scholars such as Conteh-Morgan (2005: 85) have suggested. Instead, Western powers have privatised aid and development agencies and a particularly troubling issue has arisen where the security and development of “those over there” is seen as only a means towards the security of “us over here” (Booth, 2007: 324; Duffield and Waddell, 2006: 12).

Finally, certain critics of human security have argued that the human security concept pathologizes and disempowers weak and undeveloped states, opposing the counter-narrative of the advocates who depict human security as emancipatory (McCormack, 2008; Duffield and Waddell, 2004). By linking security and development, Duffield and Waddell (2004: 18) have argued that a division occurs between those who *have* and those who *have not* – states which *can* provide human security for their population (Western, ‘developed’ states) and those which *cannot* (Third World, undeveloped, ‘weak’ states). Further to this and in conjunction with the continually developing norm of ‘the responsibility to protect’ – linked inextricably to the human security project by the ICISS – McCormack argues that the recharacterization of sovereignty as responsibility makes intervention easier and states less accountable for said intervention:

“[The human security discourse]... potentially allows powerful states or international institutions greater freedom to intervene in and regulate weaker states in a number of different ways. This serves to disempower the citizens of weak or impoverished states. Whilst their own state is held up to greater scrutiny and regulation by the international community – purportedly on their behalf – the citizens of those states do not have the means by which to control or hold to account major international institutions or powerful states.” (McCormack, 2008: 114)

In contrast to the realist, pluralist security framework that championed the norm of non-intervention, intervention under the banner of human security is “understood in terms of a moral-ethical framework,” and thus not only acceptable, but often desirable (Ibid.: 124-5; Cunliffe, 2010; Bain, 2010).[11] McCormack (2008: 120) and Chandler (2008: 435) both argue that the human security agenda inverts existing power relationships; by securitizing indicators of development, the weakest states are presented as existential threats to the most powerful.

## Conclusion

The concept of human security must therefore be viewed with great scepticism. To its advocates, it represents a new, broad, emancipatory lens through which to view security – a post-Cold War lens that focuses attention where it is needed most. The individual, not the state, is the referent. States are the guarantors. Sovereignty is seen as responsibility, dependent on a state’s ability to protect their populations against an ever-growing list of increasingly salient ills (Krause, 1994, 2004; Axworthy, 2001, 2004; Sen, 2000; Fukuda-Parr and Messineo, 2012). However, this essay has shown that the concept is not without a long list of criticisms that not only challenge it at the conceptual level, but argue that its adoption has done little to change the behaviour of states or to alleviate the pressures that threaten the everyday lives of the most vulnerable.

Human security is conceptually ‘fuzzy’. It is inconclusive and amorphous, representing any potential hardship that may befall an individual. To many, its holistic nature is a powerful attribute, but, to quote Paris (2001: 102), it could be argued that “human security is so vague that it verges on meaninglessness.” Although it is hard to criticise a concept designed to encourage the creation of broad coalitions with the aim of improving the lives of the most impoverished and defenceless, not everything can be a matter of (inter-)national security and not everything can command the same amount of attention from policy-makers.

Simultaneously, not everything can be considered worthy of equal resource allocation. In a world where the risk of terrorism still presents itself, it would be foolish to assume states will treat this threat to human security the same way they treat the threat posed by environmental degradation, for example. Further to this, by securitizing issues that previously fell under the rubric of development (and thus combining the two), the human security narrative immediately pathologizes weak and/or developing states. If sovereignty is dependent on a state government’s ability to protect its populations from poverty, disease, crime, homelessness, environmental degradation, and pollution, the natural result is an entrenching of existing power structures – not a reformulation of them – where those who lack the

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capacity to supply these new protections are at risk of losing their sovereignty. "Sovereignty as responsibility" has become the new catchphrase, and "those over there" have become not just threats to "us over here," but existential threats to international security.

Thus, as Booth, McCormack, and Duffield and Waddell noted, instead of working towards emancipating and helping to fulfil the lives of the most vulnerable, the human security agenda has potentially worked towards further disempowering the already penurious, removing what little agency they maintained and opening them up to the potential of increasingly less accountable intervention under the easily co-opted banner of 'human security'.

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[1] Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 115.

[2] This is a point made by arguably the two most-prominent human security advocates; see Lloyd Axworthy, 'Human Security and Global Governance: Putting People First', *Global Governance*, 7(1), (2001), pp. 19-23; Amartya Sen, 'Why Human Security?', presentation at the International Symposium

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[3] See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh and Anuradha M. Chenoy, *Human Security: Concepts and Implications* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007) and Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Carole Messineo, 'Human Security: A Critical Review of the Literature', Centre for Research on Peace and Development (CRPD) Working Paper No. 11 (Leuven: Centre for Research on Peace and Development, Jan. 2012) for an exploration of these varying definitions.

[4] United Nations, 'Human Security at the UN', accessed on: <http://unocha.org/humansecurity/about-human-security/human-security-un> (24/03/2014)

[5] In 'Critical Voices and Human Security', Ryerson Christie highlights child soldiers, domestic violence, rape as a tool of war and prostitution as issues that have been given greater attention amongst security scholars as a result of the changing security focus, *Security Dialogue*, 41, (2010), pp. 169-190, 179; Khong and MacFarlane (2006: 230) note the same with health and environmental issues.

[6] United Nations, 'Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction', United Nations General Assembly Resolution 51/45 S, (adopted 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1997)

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[7] See Maxwell A. Cameron, Robert J. Lawson and Brian W. Tomlin (eds.), *To Walk Without Fear: The Global Movement to Ban Landmines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) for a greater discussion on the key processes and primary actors involved in the movement.

[8] On the problem of “conceptual stretching,” see Giovanni Sartori, ‘Concept Misinformation in Comparative Politics’, *American Political Science Review*, 64(4), (December, 1970), pp. 1033-1053.

[9] Lakhdar Brahimi, quoted in Mary Martin and Taylor Owen, ‘The Second Generation of Human Security: Lessons from the UN and EU Experience’, *International Affairs*, 86(1), (2010), pp. 211-224, 215-216.

[10] Martin and Owen note how at a recent EU Strategic Forum meeting on human security challenges in Madrid (2009) one delegate pressed for fishing rights to become a prominent part of the human security agenda.

[11] Cunliffe and Bain do not make this point in reference directly to the idea of human security. However, considering the link between the ‘responsibility to protect’ and human security narratives, the point remains valid.

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