

Is Human Security Part of the International Security Agenda?

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KATY EDWARDS, MAR 25 2016

In the final analysis, human security is 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. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity.

UN Development Programme (1994)

Human security is an emerging concept for understanding international security. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Report published in 1994 is considered the starting point and also the milestone publication for human security. After concerns about the Cold War had shifted, Human Security emerged as one amongst other reformed international indicators. These included: rejection of economic growth as the main indicator of development; the rising frequency of internal conflicts; the impact of globalisation in spreading transnational dangers; and a post-Cold War emphasis on human rights and humanitarian intervention.[1] This essay discusses the impact this new concept of human security has had on the international security agenda, and whether it is having the developmental, humanitarian impact that it had intended.

Baylis et al (2011)[2] found there were three key elements that defined human security, its focus on the individual as the referent object of security, its multidimensional nature, and its universal/global scope. The term 'human security' can be found as far back as 1986, at the International Conference on the relationship between Disarmament and Development which sought to "enlarge world understanding that human security demands more resources for development and fewer for arms". This new concept challenged the dominance of the neorealist, realist and liberalist paradigms focus on states.

Human security's relationship with "traditional" security

The meaning of international security is dependent on the context in which it is being used and also by whom it is being used.[3] The traditional approach to security would look at the state as the primary referent object, as the key instrument of protecting civilian vital interests. A long-standing debate within international security studies is between the rationalist schools of thought: Realism and Liberalism, which both contend that the world is anarchic and that security has a narrow meaning of military action. Realists feel that states must be self-reliant and that there is a minimal chance of cooperation between states. However, they cannot explain changes to the political landscape and cannot explain the rise of international organisations.[4] Liberalists argue that cooperation between states is possible as they want to protect and further their interests, they also believe that national and collective security can result in human security.[5] Human security is therefore able to challenge previously entrenched notions of state sovereignty and non-intervention in traditional schools of thought. As the ICISS's report on the Responsibility to Protect states:

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,

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can constitute a risk to people everywhere.

ICISS, Responsibility to Protect (2001)

As MacFarlane and Khong (2006) said, “the link between human insecurity and international insecurity has been invigorated.”^[6] From this discussion arose alternative narratives of security. Buzan (1991)^[7] defined five “new” sectors of security: environmental, political, military, societal, and economic.

Schools of thought within human security

Two schools of thought have emerged from human security: freedom from want and freedom from fear.^[8] Freedom from fear seeks to limit human security to protecting the individual from violence while recognising that violence is strongly associated with poverty and weak states. This school focuses on emergency assistance, conflict resolution and peace building.^[9] Freedom from want takes a more holistic approach, looking at hunger, disease and natural disasters as security threats, with an emphasis on development.

A main factor in human security is humanitarian intervention, which challenges the traditional concept of security and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of other states. In 2001, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) said there was a “Responsibility to Protect”, and that addressing the root causes of crises is more effective in the long-term, i.e. prevention is the best solution.^[10] Bourne (2014)^[11] would support this as he states that human security issues tend to be stopped through early prevention rather than ‘later intervention’. Humanitarian intervention draws on aspects from both the “freedom schools”, and has had many successes such as the peacekeeping mission in East Timor. However, human security and humanitarian intervention can have failures, e.g. in Srebrenica and Somalia, and in Rwanda a lack of clarity and inaction led to genocide.

An issue with human security in the international security agenda is that certain policies, especially “humanitarian” intervention, can serve a selfish purpose for states. Instead of a genuine commitment to humanitarian policies and the helping of the most vulnerable in the world, Suhrke (1999)^[12] argues that non-military “middle powers” (e.g. Norway, Canada) have used the dissemination of the human security agenda to further their places in the international system.^[13] Booth (2007)^[14] supports this criticism arguing “the cold monster of the sovereign state has appropriated human security in order to help entrench its own.” It could also be said that Western powers have capitalised on human security and aid, by privatising companies that provide aid and development agencies^[15] to further their own interests.

Institutionalisation

In 2001, Newman’s^[16] constructivist analysis of human security defined four major strands of human security:

1. A basic human needs focus – foundational needs for safety, freedom, food and shelter.
2. An assertive/interventionist focus – which seeks to alleviate human suffering through intervention in weak states and during conflicts.
3. A social welfare/developmentalist focus – which seeks sustainable development and peace through partnerships not just intervention.
4. A new security focus – which emphasises the interconnectedness of a wider range of security issues, which is the negative side of globalisation, meaning state security and human security should be built together.

However, many think that the vagueness of human security undermines its effectiveness. Paris (2001)^[17] said “existing definitions of human security tend to be expansive and vague... which provides policy makers with little guidance in the prioritisation of completing policy goals and academics little sense of what, exactly, is to be studied”.

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Khong (2001)[18] argues we would end up prioritising everything. If everything is prioritised ultimately, by definition, nothing is.[19]

A useful example of human security in practice is the debate surrounding anti-personnel landmines. Many believe that anti-personnel landmines should not be viable weapons in war due to the huge damage and persistence after conflict. The UN found that they were ten times more likely to kill or injure a civilian after a conflict than a combatant during hostilities.[20] The Ottawa Convention led to the banning of these landmines, and was seen as a victory for the human security agenda. The reason this convention was so successful was because negotiations were not in the traditional form, they included NGOs and the general public.[21] However, many major states such as the USA, Russia and China have not signed nor ratified this convention. As Khong (2001)[22] said, “speaking loudly about human security but carrying a band-aid only gives false hopes to both the victims of oppression and the international community”.

In 2003, the UN Commission on Human Security (CHS) took a view in which human security is about survival, livelihoods and dignity.[23] The CHS wrote that human security is about “protect[ing] the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment. Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life.” Bourne (2014)[24] said this view is systematic, comprehensive, and preventative. Bourne (2014)[25] also found that there are four discernible stances among states and institutions: ignore it (as many do); adopt some of its issues but not all essential characteristics (as countries like the UK and some early EU actions did); use the term in a narrow meaning (as Canada and some academics do); and to seek to adopt the broader version (as the UN does).

The 2003 CHS definition has found its way into key documents (In Larger Freedom, UN, 2005) and has been used to reaffirm the importance of the concept in General Assembly debates, reports and resolutions. There have also been multilateral actions taken such as the establishment of War Crimes Tribunals, the International Criminal Court and the Anti-Personnel Landmines Treaty.[26]

An even broader definition?

The principle of non-interference is a key aspect in the sovereignty of states. It could be theorised that there has been degradation in state sovereignty in the interests of protecting people and populations. However, as Buzan (2001)[27] said, human security neglects the role of the state as a provider of security. In turn this may mean wealthier states wanting to “contain” human security by keeping people in their state of origin, rather than allowing people to transcend borders (e.g. NATO’s operation in Kosovo, 1999, and the EU’s approach to the current migrant crisis). If populations remain stable, then states are less likely to become unstable and more likely to function properly. [28] The problem with integrating human security into the international security agenda is that its issues can often be transnational and not confined within states, and there is an increasing reliance on interventionist strategies which can suit the individual security agendas of states.[29]

Human security can be seen in many places, however one that is especially interesting is human rights law. Does international human rights law offer an alternative framework to ensuring human security?[30] Human rights are inalienable, and since the mid 20th century have become increasingly part of the international agenda. A few examples include the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), and the American Convention on Human Rights (1969).

However, human security might not just concern human rights and injustices. Many such as Buzan, the UN etc would argue that environmental security is a massive part of human security. Buzan (1991) perceives environmental security as “the essential support system on which all other human enterprise depends”. Myers (1993)[31] likewise said it was “the ultimate security”. Deudney (1999)[32] theorised that security is normally concerned with exceptional measures, some environmental disasters fit this model (e.g. Chernobyl), and others don’t (e.g. climate change).[33]

Conclusion

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The human security agenda is increasingly important to the international community. Various institutes have flourished in response, including the African Human Security Initiative, the Southern African Human Security Network, La Trobe Universities' Institute for Human Security and Social Change, and the University of Pittsburgh Ford Institute for Human Security to name a few. These are but a small portion of such institutes, and does not touch on the various UN organisations that have been made based purely on a human security agenda. A fundamental and underpinning flaw however is that there are many issues with such a broad and relatively unregulated concept. It could be said it is about time that states must again be perceived to take responsibility for the individual.

However, when looking at whether human security has become part of the international security agenda, one cannot dispute that it is becoming a fundamental element of the dialogue. Countless cases of intervention have been classed as 'humanitarian', but how many of these were to serve the state intervening? A current and tender example of this is in Syria. With the Western powers 'intervening', one asks will this not just cause more devastation? Many would argue that it will. One could also argue that many of the interventions in the Middle East have just been a Western grab for resources.

As this essay has demonstrated, the human security question is agonisingly complex and perhaps most concerning, it seems increasingly open to manipulation. This essay closes on a thought-provoking comment made by Johns (2014)

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'.[34]

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