

Why Human Security?

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The Commission on Human Security defined human security as the protection of the “vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and fulfillment”. Before such approaches on security came to the fore, the East-West military balance of the Cold War had only created an illusion of security – as people were still being killed by “proxy wars, environmental degradation, poverty, disease, hunger, violence, and human rights abuses”. But since the fall of the Berlin wall this illusion no longer holds and the “faith placed in the realist world view and the security it provided” can no longer mask the actual issues threatening the individual. New approaches to security began to be devised, and Emma Rothschild thus summarizes the evolution of the concept of security as:

“... security being brought down to the individual, brought up to the international system or supranational physical environment, broadened from a focus on the military to include the environment, society and economy, and finally, diffused in all directions to include local governments, international agreements, nongovernmental organizations, public opinions, forces of nature and the financial market as sources of responsibility”

In this evolution, human security prolongs the classical notions of security, while bifurcating into two overarching definitions, one broad – based on the original UNDP framework of 1994, which has the profound implication of including “development” and “humanitarian” considerations into the security discourse – ; and the second narrow, focusing essentially on violent threats against the individual (including the drug trade, landmines, ethnic discord, state failure, and small arms).

Both approaches rely essentially “on non-coercive methods as much as on having the ability to intervene effectively and swiftly”. Yet if middle-powers exercise what is perceived as “moral clout” to advance the goals of human security, when larger powers take on the agenda their action is perceived instead as “unbridled hegemony”. This is an undeniable conceptual and normative challenge. “Part of the confusion, however, may lie with the necessity to distinguish between threats and vulnerabilities and their individual and collective impacts on human security”.

“Commonly, a threat is regarded as an external cause of harm [...] and is clearly visible and commonly acknowledged. A vulnerability, however, can be both internal and external”. It is also more elusive for it mobilizes the idea of risk. “Vulnerability may not be perceived, recognized or understood, making it maddeningly frustrating for decision-makers”. Characterized by its “sheer nonlinearity and unpredictability”, vulnerability is also a “creeping” concept, so ambiguous and unclear that it often leads to the “intuitive response of doing nothing at all”. The more appropriate response would rather be to “take an adaptative posture” based on prevention, flexible approaches and innovative responses to issues of vulnerability. The challenge today is that many insecurities find their source on the fault line between threat and vulnerability.

Incorporating human security concerns is thus critical to address today’s challenges. As an example, and although it is mostly focused on a narrow approach, the EU human security doctrine has quite rightly emphasized normative aspects of upholding the concept (protecting human rights, working multilaterally and with bottom-up approaches, and strengthening legal frameworks).

In conclusion, then: “Why human security? The answer is increasingly apparent: until we can ensure that people are safe not just from interstate war and nuclear proliferation, but also from preventable disease, starvation, civil conflict and terrorism then we have failed the primary objective of security – to protect.”