

HIV/AIDS: A Human Security Challenge for the 21st Century

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Analyzing the human security implications of the global AIDS pandemic provides a welcome opportunity to explore theoretical arguments on human security from the perspective of a tangible case study. HIV/AIDS is also particularly pertinent as a case in point because of its direct and indirect human security implications, “so immense that they do not constitute one human security issue among many, but rank amongst the gravest human security challenges the twenty-first century confronts”. Not only can the human security framework shed interesting light on the HIV/AIDS pandemic, but the concept itself and debates around it can benefit from an engagement with this issue.

With the human security framework in mind, the AIDS pandemic quickly and logically appears as one of the most serious threats that the world confronts today. HIV/AIDS is clearly a human security issue and a direct threat as Lincoln Chen and Vasant Narasimhan underlined. Studying the pandemic from the perspective of human security they noted that “at the simplest level premature and unnecessary loss of life is perhaps the greatest insecurity of human life”. Forty million people around the globe suffering from AIDS-related illnesses or living with HIV are confronted with this threat. The issue is also not confined to sub-Saharan Africa, as every region of the world has a significant number of people living with HIV/AIDS. The pandemic is quickly spreading in Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean, Russia and Eastern Europe. Historically and looking in numerical terms, the AIDS pandemic is amongst the worst to have ever threatened humankind.

HIV/AIDS is also an indirect threat to human security. *Economic security* is one of the most important components of human security affected by HIV/AIDS. The illness has clear negative impacts on individuals and communities but it is also thought to impact national income of worst affected states, as HIV/AIDS affects the economically productive segments of society. In terms of *food security* HIV/AIDS can not only affect the production of agricultural goods, but can further skew the access of certain individuals and groups to food – as often food security is a challenge of ‘access’ rather than a matter of physical availability. *Personal security* is also under stress, as people with HIV can suffer from stigma and violence inflicted upon them. Entire communities can also grow more vulnerable when HIV/AIDS prevalence is high. Because of the epidemic, the number of orphans left to fend for themselves is on the rise, while family and group support networks tend to loosen. This erosion of *community security* has also important impacts on *political security*, the pandemic often affecting political elites, representatives of the justice system and government bureaucrats. Finally HIV/AIDS has obvious and wide implications for *health security*: more people come to seek health services in countries where oftentimes the health system is already overstretched. This leads to the saturation of hospital services, rising health costs, and poor treatment of all patients, while some are even being refused access to health care.

Turning back to the conceptual discussion around human security, and using the threats posed by the global AIDS pandemic as a case study, the analytical breadth of the human security concept “emerges not so much as a liability, but on the contrary, as a distinctive asset over the narrower conception of national security”. The breadth of the concept has also proved useful in uniting diverse actors from a wide variety of backgrounds around the issue. In broadening the scope of security, human security has also helped place the HIV/AIDS challenge on the international security agenda. But discussions should not be allowed to drift away from people-centered concerns to study how AIDS may affect state stability, the military or peacekeeping forces

Clarifying certain remaining conceptual tensions between human security, national security and state stability and sovereignty will thus be a key in further advancing the concept.