

### *Human rights 'lite'? Thoughts on human security*

'Human security' is an idea that has, for the most part, found easy acceptance among those concerned with international social and humanitarian issues. The basic premise underlying the notion of human security—that there should be a reorientation in foreign policy from a focus on states to a focus on individuals—fits comfortably with a wide range of global agendas for change. The simple idea that it is the security (and insecurity) of individual human beings that ought to be the priority for international policy-setting can be readily embraced by a diverse group of activists, scholars and decision-makers. No doubt it is precisely this that lies behind the popularity of the concept. Indeed, the idea is so familiar to those who are active on global social issues, that it hardly seems new at all.

For those working on human rights issues, this familiarity lies behind the appeal of human security approaches. The focus on individuals and the explicit effort to challenge state-centric security doctrines are key human rights themes. Familiar too is the notion of a holistic approach, as both human rights and human security are relevant across a range of global issues. It would seem that there is a natural alliance between the two concepts. Human rights actors ought, therefore, to welcome the human security approach and, indeed, the folding in to this approach of various actions dedicated to the protection of human rights.

The purpose of this short note is to sound a note of caution and challenge moves to ally human rights too quickly with human security. It suggests that, on close examination, human security is too vague and imprecise to offer much of substance to efforts to advance protection of human rights. Further, where there is precision in the term it appears in many cases simply to be re-stating already accepted human rights principles, and there seems little to be gained by re-packaging these principles as 'human security'. There are advantages to identifying a theme, such as human security, to link and unify action across a broad range of global issues, but there are also risks. The precision and legality of the human rights framework could suffer if too closely allied with the ambiguity and mere rhetorical appeal of human security.

### *Exploring definitions*

One cannot explore the relationship between human rights and human security without first trying to define the scope and content of both concepts. What are we comparing and contrasting? It is here where the difficulty starts. What does it mean to say one is adopting a 'human-security approach'?

There is no accepted definition. Beyond an agreement on the idea of shifting the foreign policy focus from state security to individual security, there is little in common among proponents of human security about what, in practice, this would mean.

The 1994 *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was the first major international effort to articulate human security as including specific *programmatic* elements, that is with components requiring action by governments and international organizations. The 1994 Report spoke of human security as including ‘... two major components: freedom from fear and freedom from want’. Flowing from these were ‘... four essential characteristics’, these being that the concept was of universal relevance, that its components were interdependent (threats to either set of freedoms would affect enjoyment of the other), that the best way to ensure security was to take preventive action, and that such action must be people-centred.

For human rights actors, this is a familiar list, freedom from fear and want being two of the four key freedoms underlying the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Universality, interdependence, preventive action, and the primacy of individuals are all key elements of any effort to promote and protect human rights. So familiar was the description, in fact, that many of those who read the 1994 Report assumed ‘human security’ was simply, in the days before a UN commitment to mainstreaming human rights, UNDP-speak for human rights. There was, however, one significant drawback. The ‘major components’ in the 1994 Report did not explicitly include the other two essential freedoms underlying the 1948 Declaration, namely freedom of expression and religion. Freedom of expression, as expanded and developed in the Universal Declaration, included basic rights to free speech, association, assembly and political participation.

If we use the definition in the 1994 Report there would be considerable disadvantages in allying human rights and human security approaches. The latter would appear to be a watered down version of the former. Human security would appear as a sort of ‘human rights lite’, more palatable perhaps to governments (for whom talk of ‘rights’ might be threatening) but also lacking a crucial focus on those very freedoms which protect rights to participation and empowerment.

Almost ten years after the 1994 Report, the independent Commission on Human Security defined its subject in ways that sought to embrace the missing freedoms, stressing participation and empowerment as key elements of human security, and indeed aligning human security very closely to the language of human rights. In the view of the Commission, human security ‘... seeks to protect people against a broad range of threats to individuals and communities and, further, to empower them to act on their own behalf. ... Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms—freedoms that are the essence of life.’ A human security approach aims ‘... to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment’. If the human security approach means no more (nor less) than protecting individual rights and freedoms, than the distinction between it and the human rights approach is unclear.

The manner in which the Commission’s report addresses various pressing threats or insecurities strengthens the link to human rights, as many of the most substantial and specific policy recommendations concern measures to implement, monitor or strengthen human rights commitments. The very title of the Commission’s report, ‘Human Security Now’, appears to deliberately push this linkage, as it invokes the language of the Amnesty International music tour of the 1980s (Human Rights Now!).

Recognizing the need for at least some clarity and definition, Commission co-chair Amartya Sen contributes in the first pages of the report a short note on ‘Human rights and human security’. In it he sets out the obvious points of complementarity, but then argues the ‘significant contribution’ that human security brings:

The basically normative nature of the concept of human rights leaves open the question of which particular freedoms are crucial enough to count as human rights that society should acknowledge, safeguard and promote. This is where human security can make a significant contribution by identifying the importance of freedom from basic insecurities—new and old.

Sen's point seems to be that human security approaches will give greater content to human rights principles. This is a bizarre claim. Leaving aside the point that there is no agreed list of human insecurities (so how to choose at an international level which to include?), it is simply wrong to assert that the existing human rights framework 'leaves open' what freedoms deserve protection. On the contrary, a detailed, established and internationally agreed set of legal standards provide impressive detail and clarity on this point. The International Bill of Human Rights, comprising the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the two International Covenants, on Civil and Political, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights respectively, protect the whole range of human rights and freedoms. These general instruments (the latter two of which have been ratified by over three-quarters of the world's governments) are complemented by specific treaties to prevent discrimination and torture and to protect women's, children's and migrant's rights. There are in addition dozens of internationally agreed standards relating to the protection of human rights in wartime, in the administration of justice, in relation to minorities, and on economic and social entitlements. There are also internationally appointed quasi-judicial and expert panels that regularly apply these many standards, and in doing so create a rich and expanding jurisprudence of human rights.

There are many interesting points in the Commission's report. It does not provide much, however, that would add real value for human rights actors. It deals with familiar themes (migration, post-conflict reconstruction, protection of civilians, education and health) but in many cases in ways that simply reassert the need to respect or fully implement existing international human rights, humanitarian, and refugee law commitments. Furthermore, no clear rationale is provided for why some 'insecurities' are included in the report and others left out, fuelling the suspicion that re-packaging the precision of rights in the rhetoric of 'human security' allows for a pick-and-choose approach.

### *Where's the beef?*

Perhaps it is unfair to base a critique of human security on these two reports. No doubt the expanding academic literature on human security provides more cogent explanations of the distinctions between it and the human rights concept. There is also nothing particularly wrong with using the term 'human security' to describe what amount in effect to human rights principles, where doing so is necessary to advance respect for those principles. That is, if it can be shown that the discourse of 'human security' is an effective means of advancing respect for human rights, then advocates for the latter should not be unduly troubled. After all, the language of individual human rights, and its emphasis on law, is less familiar in some cultural settings. A yearning for human *security* may be a more universal emotion.

Seen from the perspective of human rights advocates, however, one can understand why there would seem little point in adopting a 'human security approach'. The human rights framework is more holistic than 'narrow' human security definitions, which encompass freedom from fear and want, but not free expression and participation rights. Broader definitions of human security, on the other hand, seem to encompass the fuller rights agenda but in ways that suggest nothing more than old wine in new bottles.

For those who find rights language legalistic, overly western or politically difficult, such re-packaging has an advantage. Human rights advocates, however, could be forgiven for failing to see the point. One of the common objections to 'rights talk' is, upon closer examination, an enormous advantage, namely that human rights are grounded in law. There is a significant body of *international* law, negotiated and agreed to by states, that sets out in detail the human rights and freedoms that are protected and the steps governments need to take to give effect to those rights. The advantage this offers should be obvious. Insofar as the targets of a human security approach are governments, the language of law and obligation is extremely compelling, in a way that the rhetoric of human security cannot match.

Looked at more positively, there are components of human security that go beyond human rights, even if the latter are defined broadly. The broad disarmament and sustainable development agendas, for example, could be comfortably housed in the human security framework. At their core, these agendas include much which is about protecting human rights but also go much further. The inherent elasticity in the human security approach necessarily allows for such expansiveness, and this approach is certainly comprehensive. The advantage of this is, as the Commission on Human Security argues, that it '... integrat[es] today's fragmented efforts to protect and empower people exposed to severe threats to their survival, livelihood and dignity'. The appeal for human rights actors is that the human security approach, through integration, allows them to understand the relationship between their work and work on other human security themes (peace and conflict, disarmament, development, etc.).

As an organizing principle, therefore, human security may offer some advantage, by clearly linking work to protect human rights to other global agendas for change. It should be pointed out, however, that human rights groups—especially at the local level—have been making such linkages for many years. Even large, so-called 'classic' human rights groups are increasingly linked into and contribute actively on disarmament, peace, poverty, social justice, environment and humanitarian issues. We should welcome any assistance the human security concept provides in this regard, but shy away from any grand claims that such a unifying concept is necessary for integration.

In sum, whatever claims a 'human security approach' may advance in relation to pressing global issues, it is likely to continue to be met with scepticism by human rights advocates. It appears to offer little more *in substance* than the rights approach, and in any case does so in ways that are less precise and compelling than the legal rules of international human rights and humanitarian law. As a unifying theory, or organizing principle, for global agendas for change, a human security 'approach' might play an important role, but it would be a mistake to subsume human rights claims within this framework if in doing so the precision of such claims were lost.

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This is a personal contribution, and does not reflect the position of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue.