

Can Human Security Ideas Ever Be Truly “Critical”?¹

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27 | Page

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In March 2016, the international humanitarian medical organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) decided to suspend its activities at the Moria refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos until further notice. Moria was a major centre where refugee arrivals were identified, registered, and fingerprinted before being relocated for settlement or returned to their home countries. The decision of MSF followed the announcement of the EU-Turkey deal, which led to the forced return of migrants and asylum-seekers from the Greek island. In its statement, MSF (2016) said that continuing to work there “would make us complicit in a system we consider to be both unfair and inhumane. We will not allow our assistance to be instrumentalized for a mass expulsion operation, and we refuse to be part of a system that has no regard for the humanitarian or protection needs of asylum seekers and migrants.” For a time, the UNHCR itself refused to be involved in the implementation of the deal between the EU and Turkey.

1 The article also draws upon the author’s article ‘Human Security: Reconciling Critical Aspirations with Political ‘Realities’’, *British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 56, no. 6, 2016.

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The predicament that these humanitarian agencies found themselves in raises a range of questions and problems at the heart of human security as a policy guide. Some twenty years after human security emerged as a policy concept in a landmark UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP, 1994), a fundamental challenge concerns whether human security can work both as a radical concept *and* as a policy instrument – thus, if human security can be theoretically critical whilst also policy-relevant.

According to the principle of human security, the referent object and beneficiary of security should be individuals and communities. When the idea became popularized within an international policy setting, thanks to the UN Development Programme, it was considered to be quite radical. The concept has had some success as a normative reference point for human-centred policy movements and a number of states and intergovernmental organizations have adopted human security as a policy theme. It has also been embraced by many civil society actors.

However, over the last twenty years, human security has proven to be quite weak in its policy application, and it arguably no longer poses difficult questions for the holders of power – if it ever did. In policy circles such as the UN and the EU, human security is generally used – at best – to ameliorate the manifestations and symptoms of insecurity and deprivation. It is not used as a device to expose and address the structural conditions which give rise to this insecurity. Human security is promoted and operationalized within the existing political, legal and normative constraints of the ‘real world’.

For many academic observers, this has undermined whatever credibility the concept of human security ever had, and theoretically critical security studies has become increasingly hostile towards it. The gap between security studies and policy-oriented human security has become wider than ever.

Most importantly, there is a fundamental paradox or predicament at the heart of human security in terms of



its policy operationalization. Human security, taken to its logical conclusion, holds 'critical' implications for the way politics and economics are organized: it challenges the values and institutions which exist as they relate to human welfare, and it focuses upon underlying sources of insecurity. Yet the ontological starting point of most human security analysis and its policy orientation assume the inevitability and legitimacy of these institutions (see Newman, 2010; Newman, 2016).

This leads to some key questions:

- Can 'progressive' ideas such as human security change the institutions and structures that generate insecurity?
- Alternatively, can human security policy interventions have a meaningful and positive impact upon individual lives *without* changing the structural sources of deprivation?
- Has the operationalization of human security undermined its transformational potential?
- Can radical aspirations be reconciled with political 'realities', or does this undermine human security as an intellectual project?
- Can the operationalization of human security ever be complicit with deeper sources of insecurity or deprivation?
- In presenting security as a positive value, does Human Security reinforce the securitization of everyday life?

There is a twofold challenge for the human security movement. Firstly, human security is challenged to demonstrate that it has humanitarian value, that it can have a positive impact upon the lives of people who are marginalized, deprived, and persecuted. This means that the human security concept – and those academics who champion it – has to withstand critique on its ability to fulfil its own internal logic and promise. Most importantly, this concerns whether the human security field is asking the 'right' questions. If it is not, this form



of internal critique exposes internal contradictions and limitations and the intellectual ambitions of human security will flounder. Secondly, the human security movement faces acute political challenges in broader perspective, as 'security' is defined in ever more regressive ways in the context of the 'war on terror', and an upsurge of nationalist and populist politics. Linked to this, the values and institutions of multilateralism – that is, the internationalist environment that gave rise to the human security movement in policy circles – are increasingly under strain in a transitional international order. The traditional sponsors of multilateralism in North America and Europe are either unwilling or unable to uphold global public goods in the way that they did since the end of the Second World War, and the newly rising or resurgent states have not yet demonstrated their commitment to uphold these norms and institutions. The normative and political contestation generated by this changing international order – as a form of power political resurgence – has pushed many progressive movements, such as human security, off the radar. As a result of these trends, human security is in an increasingly inhospitable environment. Yet, simultaneously, it is needed more than ever, given the range of pressing challenges which confront the world. The challenge is therefore for human security, as a concept and as a policy movement, to adapt to the changing political realities but also to stay true – or perhaps to return to – its radical beginnings in a way that has traction both in policy circles and within academia. Whether human security survives as a meaningful project depends to a large degree on its capacity to achieve this.

Human security as policy

The human security concept has been applied to policy in a number of ways. It has been promoted as a broad human-focussed orientation by groups of states, through things such as the Human Security Network, the Commission on Human Security, and in regional settings, including the African Union, ASEAN, and the European Union. In this sense, human security rests



upon a broader movement to give greater attention to people-centred challenges relating, for example, to poverty, underdevelopment, human trafficking, and human rights violations. The landmark 2005 World Summit Outcome (UN, 2005) provided a milestone for the human security agenda in policy terms by endorsing the concept as a general public good. Human security can therefore be seen alongside other policy efforts such as the movement to ban anti-personnel landmines, the promotion of corporate social responsibility, and the movement to protect civilians from atrocities such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide (which culminated in the establishment of the 'Responsibility to Protect' principle).

Secondly, human security has been operationalized in the implementation of project assistance, in particular in relation to development programmes and post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction. This provides a useful empirical illustration of how human security has been operationalized and – if any – its added value in terms of alleviating human suffering and deprivation.

Some of the UN's work in the area of human security has been facilitated by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS, 2017), which was established by the UN in 1999. Up until the end of 2013, the UNTFHS had funded 214 projects in over 85 countries, with over \$415 million disbursed since its foundation.

With the support of the UNTFHS, many UN agencies have implemented field programmes and activities aimed at promoting the health and welfare of communities, and this provides further illustration of how human security has been translated into policy. These agencies include UN Development Programme, Food and Agricultural Programme, UN Children's Fund, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, World Food Programme, UN Population Fund, World Health Organization, UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UN Development Fund for Women, UN Relief and Works Agency, UN Human Settlements Programme, International Atomic Energy Agency, UN



Industrial Development Organization, UN Mine Action Services, International Labour Organization, UN Volunteers, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, International Organization for Migration, UN Office on Drugs and Crime and some UN peacekeeping missions, including the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNTFHS, 2017). As a requirement of this funding, these organizations must conceptualize their activities with reference to human security and demonstrate how the concept brings added value.

The reports of the programmes undertaken with the use of UNTFHS resources also provide a good indication of the sort of concrete activities undertaken in the name of human security: programmes to improve pastoral livelihoods and food security, supporting access to basic healthcare for vulnerable communities, increasing access to primary education, strengthening resilience in communities which are vulnerable to natural disasters, supporting school feeding programmes, promoting HIV/AIDS awareness and reducing risk, increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services, facilitating the rehabilitation of war victims, promoting girls' education and development, assisting rural communities in agricultural and livestock development, development within refugee-impacted communities, managing water and energy services for poverty eradication, assistance in micro- and small-scale enterprise development for displaced communities, programmes for reducing maternal morbidity and mortality, programmes to promote the use of insecticide-treated bed-nets and household management of malaria by mothers, protecting and reintegrating internally displaced persons, supporting centres which address violence against women, supporting skills training and community service facilities for the reintegration of ex-combatants and former rebels, supporting drug demand reduction, support for former poppy farmers, prevention of trafficking in children and women at the community level, promoting community reconciliation through poverty reduction in



post-conflict societies, rebuilding after natural disasters and removing the threat of cluster bombs and promoting post-demining rehabilitation, amongst others (UNTFHS, 2017). At the programme level, these human security interventions undoubtedly enhance the welfare and livelihoods of individuals and communities. Arguably, even if the human security concept does not bring much added value in terms of addressing practical needs, this list also illustrates that human security has generated additional attention and resources for such challenges. There has also been renewed interest in human security at the UN following the endorsement of the concept at the 2005 UN summit, with a keynote report of the UN Secretary-General (2013).

However, in policy circles, human security has evolved from being a fairly radical challenge to state-centric realism to a rather conservative idea that largely runs in parallel with – but secondary to – conventional security thinking.

It is helpful to recall why the 1994 Human Development Report was so pioneering. The HDR suggested that: “For most people, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Will they and their families have enough to eat? Will they lose their jobs? Will their streets and neighborhoods be safe from crime? Will they be tortured by a repressive state? Will they become a victim of violence because of their gender? Will their religion or ethnic origin target them for persecution?” In dealing with ‘personal security’, the report lists seven types of threat, and, notably, the first one reads “Threats from the state (physical torture)”, and also includes “Threats directed against women (rape, domestic violence)” (UNDP, 1994).

This kind of radical thinking, in terms of how the UN promotes human security, is quite absent from diplomatic discourse on human security more recently. The way that human security has been promoted in the UN context does not acknowledge that some states are often unable or unwilling to protect the basic security needs of individuals and communities, and the UN’s reluctance



to acknowledge this, while unsurprising, exposes the fundamental weakness of the intergovernmental approach to human security.

The operationalization of the human security concept has also failed to explore or deepen understanding of the underlying or structural conditions which give rise to insecurity. So, human security has been reinvigorated at the UN, but at the same time it has been institutionalized within the conventional, state-centric parameters of international society. In this sense, the UN's human security activities and programmes, although often well intentioned, at best address the manifestations of deprivation and insecurity, and generally not its underlying root causes. It therefore remains doubtful whether human security has brought forth a genuine reconceptualization of security at the UN. It now, within the UN at least, reflects a conservative approach to addressing human insecurity, notwithstanding the great assistance that it brings to people who receive help from human security projects.

Can human security ever be truly critical whilst also policy-relevant?

Some critics of human security argue that human security has become mainstreamed – at least rhetorically – in policy circles since the 1990s because human security serves existing hegemonic interests. For some analysts, this undermines the value of human security. Some scholars write that: “human security cannot be rescued because it has been institutionalized and co-opted to work in the interests of global capitalism, militarism and neoliberal governance” (Turner et al., 2011, p. 83). The human security concept is also subject to broader critiques that have been generated towards the concept of security and securitization as a negative, pernicious force in whose name rights are trampled upon (Chandler, 2011; Christie, 2010; Neocleous, 2008). Clearly, many of these critical perspectives are not merely suggesting that the human security idea, as



a policy orientation, is ineffective or insignificant, but rather that it is pernicious and oppressive.

These arguments can and should be challenged. Human security provides an opportunity for security studies scholars who hope to make a positive impact upon the world.

Clearly, the human security concept does not exist in a vacuum, devoid of existing political structures and institutions. Progress is often slow and human security must often be promoted in the context of hostile structures. Any evaluation of it must take this as a starting point. And within an inhospitable power political environment, a shift towards the needs of individuals and communities might be something to be welcomed, even when it does not challenge or change the institutions which generate and perpetuate that insecurity. Still, we should be vocal in holding political actors accountable when they claim to be adhering to concepts such as human security or the Responsibility to Protect.

With this in mind, we can consider if policy approaches to human security – for example, those undertaken through the UN Trust Fund for Human Security – can be meaningful at the human level, even if they do not address the structural sources of insecurity and deprivation.

When human security has been adopted by policy actors, it has arguably been applied to some positive effect, and the human security interventions described earlier have improved the lives of thousands of people. To reject this outright because it reflects a ‘problem-solving’ approach to address insecurity in cooperation with state actors is morally questionable.

But a more critical academic approach can be pursued that engages with policy and promotes a greater consideration of the structural dimensions of deprivation and insecurity. Human security must be used to interrogate and problematise the values and institutions which currently exist as they relate to human welfare, and more thoroughly question the interests that are served by these institutions.



For example, the grassroots activities supported by the UNTFHS address challenges such as food insecurity, lack of access to basic healthcare and primary education, vulnerability to natural disasters, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, deprivation and victimization in forcibly displaced populations, lack of access to life-saving medicines, human trafficking, and the threat of cluster bombs and unexploded ordinance. This does result in meaningful improvements in the lives of individuals and communities which receive such support, in the name of human security.

However, the prevalence of these challenges can only be understood – and addressed – in their social, political and economic contexts. These deprivations are generally the consequence of severe underdevelopment rooted in the international terms of trade, the integration of developing societies in neo-liberal norms of globalization, and unpayable poor country debts. The failure of the ‘international community’ to address situations of armed conflict or uphold an effective asylum and refugee system, the failure to prevent the free flow of weapons into conflict-prone regions, a pharmaceutical market which makes it impossible for poor communities to afford life-saving medicines are also structural conditions that are ignored in the operationalization of human security.

How can we judge if human security interventions are morally compromised? An ethical framework is needed:

A human security intervention is flawed if it is merely managing human misery or containing the consequences of this, or if it serves to directly legitimize or perpetuate the broader structures which give rise to this insecurity. In these circumstances, it would be flawed even if it ameliorated the suffering of some individuals and communities, if it plays a role in perpetuating the broader sources of deprivation which undermine the personal security of far larger numbers of people.

A human security intervention would be illegitimate if it diverts attention or resources away from addressing the underlying sources of deprivation.



A human security intervention would be problematic if it involves concessions to the political authorities which are responsible for the broader situation of deprivation, since this would directly or indirectly endorse those authorities.

Human security interventions, in the context of wider structural inequities, are morally acceptable when they are not operationalized through illegitimate authorities provided that they have a demonstrable positive impact, and that they are undertaken in a way that does not obstruct other efforts to address the structural sources of insecurity and injustice.

We have to believe that there is a meaningful prospect for academics to seek to bring about changes in policy which enhance the life chances of individuals and communities. Human security can be rescued from its predicament if scholars engage with the concept critically.



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