Human Security: Present and Future Frontiers

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Amartya Sen, one of the founding fathers of the idea of human security, remarked twenty years ago that it is actually not a new idea, but that human security had had a remarkable revival from the mid-1990s, being constantly evoked in discussions, and taken up as a policy 'leitmotif' by some (Sen, 2013, p. 17; Werthes & Bosold, 2006).

This surge in popularity has come at a price. The term 'human security' is often used loosely and without much reflection on what it means and what its implications are. It is a measure of how far human security has come towards being an emerging universal norm that all kinds of political actors invoke as a way of wrapping themselves in its legitimacy even when their motives and their methods are very far from securing the safety, welfare and dignity of individuals.

People and states have concerned themselves with the security of individuals for centuries. In the 17th century, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes wrote of the need for a mutual obligation between the state and individuals. The sovereign power had a duty to protect its citizens and they in return had to consent to give it their allegiance and obedience. This is the political contract

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which underlies a good and safe life – what Hobbes called the *commonwealth*. Without it, Hobbes famously asserted, individuals were on their own and their lives were solitary, nasty, brutish and short.

Hobbes is identified with the emerging idea of modern statehood and state power. His concern in his 1651 treatise *Leviathan* was to promote the concept of the all-powerful sovereign to whom individuals should owe allegiance; thus, he is usually associated with the beginnings, not of human security, but of state-based security where the state's imperative, rather than the individual or collective needs of people, defines security. In 1994, when UNDP coined the term 'human security' to mark a turn away from this classic understanding of security and highlighted a different type and level of need and risk as the basis for security, the state and the individual were cast on opposite sides of a conceptual coin.

This opposition or even dichotomy between the state and the individual underpinned the early years of human security post-1994 but has more recently begun to break down. Now the challenge is to see how human security can enhance what states do in terms of guaranteeing the safety and rights of individuals and how state resources and institutions can mainstream human security ideas.

Underlying both the 17th-century and 20th-century concepts of security is a requirement for protection against the outside world and its manifold dangers. This remains the first and principal tenet of human security – human life is worth something and must be preserved. In proposing a political arrangement between the individual and the state, mediated by collective association and initiative, Hobbes also touched on the second tenet of human security – that of empowerment. His proposition of a contract between the powerful and those needing their power in order to stay safe contained the premise that power is exercised at a price and that the state could only legitimately wield its influence abroad against the enemies of the people if it was also prepared to act in the people's interests at home.

Although there is an ideational link between 17th-century and contemporary articulations of human security, it was context rather than ideas which shaped how understandings of security evolved. This led in Hobbes's day – in the midst of England's civil war and state collapse – in one direction towards realism and a focus on strong states, and on the other hand, at the end of a century of war in the 20th century, to an emphasis on the rights and perspective of insecure individuals *contra* – rather than *cum* – the state.

Today's political events offer ample evidence of the need to protect individuals and of the failure of current security policy to put people before power politics. In Syrian cities like Aleppo, on the beaches of the eastern Mediterranean, at the frontier posts of Serbia, Hungary, Croatia, where there is sectarian violence and real hardship for individuals, geopolitics, nationalism and state interests are trampling on human security. Even humanitarian assistance is struggling to cope in these situations; human rights are routinely and systematically abused. Amartya Sen's idea of security for people rather than states at moments of downturn and crisis, and the direction of policy towards ensuring basic freedoms, dignity and empowerment of people appear to be in retreat.

At the turn of this century, human security proponents had the luxury of engaging in academic debates about broad versus narrow definitions of the concept. Sceptics warned that human security masked a form of biopolitics, and that by focusing on people, this type of security was an attempt to control and oppress them by manipulating the very attributes which make them human (Chandler, 2008). Human security debates quickly became bogged down in definitional nuance.

Today, the questions that confront students of human security, policy makers and practitioners are both more existential and practical. Human potential is being curtailed and freedoms trampled beneath a different kind of state-based politics. After twenty years, are we contemplating a kind of Pyrrhic victory for human

security – that it can be considered a global norm, only to be discarded from key policy agendas on the most important issues of global and regional security? How can this norm be translated into action on behalf of vulnerable groups and communities in ways which then either demonstrate or challenge its validity within contemporary security thinking? How can it be both global and local in application? In this article, I want to take stock of the current meanings attached to human security, gauge its present political force and suggest how it might move forward.

The last two decades have marked considerable progress for human security thinking but there is no consensus acceptance for it in either conceptual or practical terms. It continues to meet resistance and pushback, but more than this, as the examples from Syria and Eastern Europe show, there is a risk that human security is marginalized in key policy debates.

Yet human security has progressed beyond being simply a worldview or a utopian vision of how things should be. It has been taken up by the UN, notably through the General Assembly resolution 66/290 of September 2012 which agreed a common definition of human security as:

"The right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential."

The UN Secretary-General's follow-up report to the GA resolution noted that an increasing number of member states, including Mexico, Ecuador, Kenya, Thailand, Mongolia and Lithuania, were using human security to strengthen national planning and address disparities and inequities.[2] The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) finances activities by UN organizations to demonstrate the added value of the human security

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2 Follow-up to General Assembly Resolution 66/290 on Human
   Security, 23 December 2013.

approach and expand use and awareness of it as a concept and method. There are no current figures for UNTFHS spending, but since it was set up in 1999, the Fund, financed by member states, notably the government of Japan, has disbursed over $350m in 70 countries.[3]

Antonio Gutierres, taking up office as the UN Secretary-General in January 2017, said that human dignity would be at the core of his term, although he did not mention human security by name.[4]

The UN 2030 agenda of sustainable development is infused with ambitions of human development, the creation of public goods to satisfy core needs such as food, water, education and combat poverty and an emancipated vision of previously disadvantaged communities. Yet nowhere is the term human security mentioned.

Other actors such as the European Union, also notable for its embrace of a holistic and people-centred understanding of security also rarely, and less frequently than in the past, use the term. For example, in the 2016 EU Global Security Strategy, entitled "Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe", there are just four mentions of human security compared with 34 for 'resilience'. The latter term has come to express the idea of sustainable and people-centred development, and has overtaken human security as a conceptual framework for policy.[5]

Perhaps this does not matter: the underlying principles of human security are more important than terminology. To worry about a shift in the vocabulary of security, and the replacement of one phrase by another newly fashionable one, might appear to be an undue concern with semantics. However, there are several implications of this decline in the term human security which are worth noting.

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3 See more:http: //mptf.undp.org/factsheet/fund/HSF00 [Accessed 1 May 2017]

4 See more: http: //www.un.org / sustainabledevelopment / secretary - general / [Accessed 1 May 2017]

5 See more: https: //europa.eu / globalstrategy / sites / globalstrategy / files / pages / files/ eugs_review_web_13. pdf [Accessed 3 May 2017]

Firstly, perhaps more than any other security approach, human security still faces tremendous political opposition, particularly by states who believe it is either a cover for forced regime change and external intervention – as was the case with Responsibility to Protect – or who see it as a binary opposite of the preservation of statehood and state power. If states still feel uncomfortable with the idea of human security, what does this tell us about contemporary relationships between people, politics and power? If there is a resistance to using or talking about human security, does this point to a flaw in the idea itself or does it highlight a more foundational issue of the motives, agendas and capacities of those who set security policy and practice?

Instead of becoming embedded and internalized as part of global security discourse, the contested status of human security means it is easier to relegate it and replace it with other thematic or guiding principles. In this case, the fundamental shift that human security promises, towards enshrining the protection of individuals rather than states, remains partial and incomplete. It becomes easier to revert to the default mode of classic state sovereignty and defence.

Another consequence of the proliferation of human security as a term in the past twenty years is that, while it is resisted in some state-based policy circles, it has been picked up by others seeking to cloak themselves in its perceived legitimacy. Russian security discourse, for example, has used the term as a justification for armed aggression in the case of Georgia in 2008, when Russia claimed the invasion and occupation of Georgian territory was in order to protect the human security of ethnic Russians in South Ossetia. As Makarychev points out, whereas in the west human security initially proposed a stronger role for non-state actors, Russia has used it to substantiate increased state intervention (Makarychev, 2013, p. 153)

Secondly, the persistent problem of slipperiness makes it more likely that human security can be manipulated politically. It is regarded as conceptually imprecise and as

carrying no particular follow-through in terms of policy prescription or practice. In contrast to, say, human rights, human security is not codified in terms of international law or even soft law. It comes with no prescriptive rule book or sanction if it is breached or ignored. This lack of precision in terms of definition and policy application is often cited by policy-makers as the reason for not using it in praxis or lexis (Brahmi cited in Martin & Owen, 2010).

Chinkin and Kaldor, while claiming that human security is a "practical strategy in difficult places", also suggest that it is the lack of accompanying tools or strategies which makes it difficult to realize human security. "It requires extensive political, economic, legal and security tools to implement multi-level, multi-faceted peace agreements, post-conflict development reforms and piecemeal rather than grand solutions" (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017). Taken as a set of normative objectives, which comprise the dense and diverse security needs facing individuals in conflict or crisis situations, human security appears to offer no immediate or straightforward propositions about what exactly can be done to address such complexity. At the very least, a human security strategy is likely to be messy: instead of a single top-down peace agreement, human security involves hybrid processes combining elite action, such as high-level diplomacy, with action on the ground with multiple stakeholders, all with different needs and conflicting agendas. Viewed like that, grand, overarching and top-down security strategies seem much easier to implement, and continue to be pursued by policy-makers.

The UN, faced with this problem of imprecision alongside the potential of conceptual overstretch, have emphasised the idea of human security as a particular methodology: human security means 'how' security is done, not only 'what' the objectives are. The UN Human Security Unit's handbook focuses on the need to deal with the context of individual insecurity, narrowing down objectives to those which are particularly salient to a specific community, location and time period. It urges policies and strategies which promote empowerment and an active role for local communities in building their own security.

Thirdly, a decline in the use of the term human security blocks innovative solutions to current political and security challenges. It deprives us of a vocabulary and vision to tackle issues in a different way to classic methods and approaches to political and security problems. If we are unable to name an alternative approach, we remain trapped discursively in tropes such as the War on Terror, the war against drugs/organized crime and state sovereignty. Human security expresses an intention to do more than just treat the symptoms of problems but go to the heart of underlying causes and find solutions in the everyday practical experiences of the people who are most at risk and most directly impacted by downturns, crises and adverse conditions. It functions as an important descriptor for the willingness to look at problems in an alternative way.

If human security risks slipping away before our eyes, where are the present and future frontiers of the concept which will allow us to recapture and preserve its ideals of protection and empowerment and assert that there is an alternative, more effective way of addressing insecurity?

Firstly, there is a case for assessing the missed opportunities in human security and revisiting ways in which it could have been more successfully embedded in security practice.

The 2004 Barcelona Report of the Human Security Study Group made two recommendations to the European Union which have been overlooked in terms of giving effect to a new way of doing security: first was that the EU should create a human security response force, and second was that the legal framework governing conflict, security responses and interventions also needed to change.

The 'Human Security Response Force' was proposed as a model for reconfiguring conventional capabilities such as military and armed forces to provide support for crisis interventions and target basic needs such as water, shelter and safe streets, providing essential services, rations, medical assistance and security. The idea was a pan-European force that would bring together existing

military and civilian capabilities, comprise 15,000 men and women, of whom at least one third would be civilian (with specialist skills from police, human rights monitors, development specialists and administrators), and also draw on volunteers both among local populations and in external, intervening states. The force would prioritize the safety of people caught up in combat zones. It would provide more than humanitarian assistance. It would be the focal point for continuing medium and longer-term efforts to restore normality and tolerable living conditions, but also for reducing the flow of people from the conflict zone and filling the potential vacuum of political authority which arises between military interventions and political settlements. The significance of the proposal for embedding human security ideas was that it would have entailed both an institutionalization of the operational dimension of human security and flanked the response force itself with processes such as training and lessons-learned and given human security ideas a visible manifestation. Marlies Glasius (a member of the Human Security Study Group) later sketched a job description of a human security worker as a highly trained professional, graduated from a human security academy (with) training in military and police skills, such as disarming combatants, making arrests and containing angry crowds; in how to understand development concepts and practices, such as participation and gender awareness; and in multi-purpose skills, such as logistical and legal knowledge. When not deployed, she would be constantly training and exercising. Before any deployment, however urgent, some learning sessions should always be devoted to the political and cultural context of the location. Apart from following a general curriculum, each human security worker could be specialized in one 'hard' and one 'soft' area of expertise (Glasius, 2008).

The idea of human security as a specifically endowed, trained and deployed capability never progressed beyond these ideas, although human security training has been incorporated into academic and practitioner curricula by many institutions. Although a response force resonates

with traditions of civic mobilization in EU member states and is evident today in the White Helmet groups in Syria and volunteer brigades in Ukraine, these initiatives are still principally humanitarian efforts and have not served to mainstream human security thinking in the way proposed by the Barcelona Report.

Other forms of institutionalization have been patchy: the establishment of the UN Trust Fund for Human Security, the appointment of a Special Advisor for Human Security, regular reports from the Secretary-General on human security from 2010 onwards and informal groups such as the Human Security Network (now largely defunct) and the Friends of Human Security grew out of the early enthusiasm for the concept but, with the exception of the UN Trust Fund, have not been able to lobby for, promote and preserve the political significance of human security within the mainstream.

The second area of missed opportunity is the development of a legal framework to underpin and give effect to human security ideas. The Barcelona Report argued that a law governing external intervention and operations on the ground should cut through the "tangle of … jurisdictional regimes" to provide a single and coherent body of international law governing foreign deployments. The new legal framework would build on the domestic law of the countries targeted by crisis interventions, the domestic law of intervening states, international criminal law, international human rights law and international humanitarian law (Albrecht et al., 2004, p. 19). With its focus on making external crisis interventions more legitimate and effective, the Human Security Study Group concentrated on one aspect of human security – what might be termed a narrow focus – but the principle of a legal regime to clarify and codify the normative objectives of human security remains valid, if unrealized.

A legal framework for human security would include addressing impunity as the means to establish a rule of law, which provides protection for individuals and allows them the same opportunities as currently powerful elites.

This requires a system of legitimate authority not only at the national level but within communities as well and formal methods of accountability for all power holders, national and international, to local populations. As Chinkin and Kaldor argue, the justice element of human security represents a departure from the Liberal Peace model, because it requires the arrest of those who may have been involved in peacemaking but who jeopardise ongoing peace, sustainability and resilience because they perpetuate human rights abuses or war economies and therefore contribute to the continuing vulnerability of local society (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017). Like the proposal for a new configuration of capabilities into a human security response force, this idea of inverting current justice mechanisms to establish accountability is radical and ambitious. It is not only essential to generate trust and increase the empowerment of local people in fragile societies, but it also shows how human security can offer an alternative practical vision of how to rebuild security.

Perhaps more than missed opportunities, the absence of human security on key contemporary policy agendas is a cause for concern and critical to assessing the future of the concept. Two current policy examples serve to highlight both the challenge facing human security and the scope for it to make a difference to global issues today and restate its claim to significance: migration and the role of the private sector.

There is any number of topics – climate change, terrorism, energy security and health pandemics – where human security can be applied to produce different kinds of policy, programmes and action. These issues are found in any textbook on the subject. They are used to illustrate problems which affect individuals' daily lives and to make the point that understandings and practices of security have changed and expanded in the last two decades.

Migration and the private sector are areas where human security approaches have been sidelined or ignored and where traditional understandings of security tend to prevail. Yet they serve to show what is at risk if

we allow human security to slip below the intellectual and political radar, fail to name it or link it to practical policy choices. In the case of both migration and the private sector, the vocabulary of human protection and empowerment, the emphasis on ensuring basic needs – material, physical and emotional – as policy goals, the principle of accountability to individuals, and the use of human security as a distinct methodological approach could provide alternative perspectives and solutions to security and governance problems.

Eastern Europe and the Balkans are witnessing a surge of migrants from the Mediterranean and western Asia seeking entry to the European Union, among several geographic flashpoints for people flows – from the Sahel into southern and western Europe, from Central America into the US, and between Asia and Australia.

Migration politics are dominated by traditional security thinking. EU governments have unrolled miles of barbed wire, reinforced border guards and, in the case of the UK, tried to close the English Channel under a slogan of taking back control of the country. In the US, Donald Trump threatens to build a wall to deter migrants from south of the border, as part of making America great again. Suddenly, the new normal is territorial sovereignty and defence of the nation state. Addressing migration as part of national security policy risks not only influences the future politics of states competing against each other to make sure their borders are more watertight than their neighbours', it has other consequences: a rise in cross-border organized crime and trafficking by creating a black market in people, a potential for extremism and reservoirs of deprivation, poverty and exclusion from the failure to integrate migrants within host societies. Here, then, there is an urgent need for human security scholarship, for practice and policy evidence to analyse the results of current policy approaches and to propose alternatives based on human security.

At the individual level, nobody believes they are a refugee for ever – they at least hope to be something

else. This contrasts with a top-down perspective which sees migration only as an amorphous and growing political and economic problem. Yet individual migrants and refugees morph daily into economically productive citizens and residents, contributing to and enriching their new societies in myriad ways. One change a human security approach to the migration crisis can make is to reinforce that belief that individuals are more than just what temporary circumstances and crises have forced them to become (Vietti & Scribner, 2013).

The second example represents another kind of frontier for the study and practice of human security. It is the role of the private sector in addressing human security needs in situations of crisis, conflict and transition. Business can play a significant role in attempts to rebuild societies after conflict, humanitarian disasters, health pandemics and violent regime change, and in preventing a relapse into conflict and crisis. Legitimate and responsible business activities are critical to the long-term viability of communities, states and regions. Business intersects with human security and with the resilience of individuals and communities in many ways.

Companies are a source of material security through providing jobs; they influence the psychological and emotional welfare of workers and communities; their influence extends beyond the workforce through providing and using public goods.

Companies also often have a more enduring impact than peace-builders and development agencies because investment cycles are longer than crisis interventions by international organizations. They can be the mechanisms for a focus on legitimate livelihoods, public works which improve social goods, and equal access to and delivery of economic and social rights.

The classic way of thinking about the private sector in contexts of conflict and crisis is simply as means to win foreign investment, to fix failed economies through improving currencies and GDP. Foreign corporations in particular are assumed to assist transitions from conflict

through foreign direct investment (FDI), the transfer of skills, technology and international norms. This political economy view, with its emphasis on the macro-economic components of reform and reconstruction, is preoccupied with markets and national economic institutions (Ganson & Wennmann, 2016, p. 77). Much less consideration has been given to how corporations, particularly global business, can contribute to building resilient communities and making citizens safe. Human security provides a more bottom-up perspective, which expands conventional economics and security to encompass a broader view, and one more geared to individual needs (Alkire, 2010; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007), but it needs to elaborate how companies fit into this change of emphasis, or how security policy might be expanded in ways which integrate the corporate dimension and its impacts on protection and empowerment (UNDP, 2008).

There is of course a rapidly expanding field of business and human rights which seeks to protect individuals against corporate abuse (UN, 2008). However, human rights as a discourse of governance concentrates on minimizing and mitigating abuses against local populations as the result of business operations. Although human rights are indispensable in a human security approach, human security encompasses more than a rights-based discourse from the perspective of individuals – it engages with issues such as political authority and good governance, the quality of economic development and how individuals attempt to manage their insecurity. Thus human security shows a more complex landscape of human action than defence of human rights. Furthermore, human rights is often seen by companies as a compliance issue, requiring technical and sometimes minimalist observance of international norms and principles. In contrast, human security is a more fluid, ever-changing condition shaped by the interrelation of corporate behaviour and local individual needs and expectations. The balance between universal norms and local contingencies is more weighted towards the local in human security than human rights, with human security more susceptible to being shaped flexibly

in a context-specific way than globally prescribed human rights provisions. A human security approach by business could do more than a rights-based agenda to transform the relations between the private sector and vulnerable people and communities, to improve not just their protection but also their empowerment, and to encourage companies to consider a wide range of individual needs from physical safety to food security, livelihoods with dignity and healthy environments in the areas where they operate (Martin & Bojicic-Dzelilovic, 2017).

A human security approach which involves the private sector in peacebuilding, in issues from small arms control to human trafficking, migration and better global healthcare, opens up many possibilities for innovative rather than traditional approaches to policy challenges. The potential is that companies and communities can work together constructively and find areas of mutual benefit, instead of bargaining over legal and quasi-legal obligations.

These two examples are not just cases of 'missing' human security, or evidence of a failure of human security ideas to prevail over a hegemonic discourse of either geopolitics and the War on Terror in the case of migration flows, or of neoliberalism and the desire to protect the freedoms of global capital above vulnerable people in the case of the private sector in peace and security. These cases also show that human security is far from running its course and its potential. Rather than retreating in the face of what appears to be a resurgence of classic international relations, of nationalism and zero-sum games, there is a need to identify new areas where human security can provide a different analytical perspective, where it can suggest alternative approaches to intractable problems, and point to methods which ensure that security is not just a bargain at elite levels, but a discourse of protection and emancipation which can improve the safety, welfare and dignity of communities at every level.

There is an argument that what is required of human security today is to deepen the concept rather than choose between narrowing or widening traditional

understandings of security. Deepening requires clearer conceptualization, including how human security as a term relates to other ideas such as resilience, sustainability and hybrid peace. Human security projects and interventions need to be accompanied by sharp definitions of intent and clarity of purpose (Martin & Owen, 2010, p. 12).

Kaldor and Chinkin suggest that the contemporary model of human security needs to be reconstructed as a strategy of resistance. It offers an alternative to the repolarisation of international politics and the militarization and securitization of global issues as represented by wars on terror, drugs, organized crime and so on (Chinkin & Kaldor, 2017). It is the right to be protected, as distinct from a Responsibility to Protect through top-down intervention. Achieving this means not only recourse to the universal normative nature of the human security idea, but emphasizing the importance of context, the actually situated individual (not an abstract cipher) and concrete details about how their life can be improved and their security guaranteed. This is to argue for human security as a disaggregated concept comprising micro-processes and particularities. This places human security today closer to ideas of hybridization in conflict-affected societies. Hybridization is about how local actors respond to and shape peace initiatives through working with international actors and institutions (Richmond & Audra, 2012).

It is where top-down and bottom-up initiatives meet. Where human security can lend additional traction to this concept and to the implementation of policy on the ground is to show how that space between top-down and bottom-up can be expanded and enriched through enacting ideas of protection, empowerment and allowing for the voice of individuals to be heard.

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