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Human Security: Designed Cynicism or a Poorly Implemented Idea?

Introduction

According to the website of the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, the main goal of the organisation is to establish, as its leading motto says, "Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear, and Freedom to Live in Dignity."[1]

Most of what the UN Trust Fund for Human Security affirms comes from Resolution A/RES/66/290 of 2012. Approved by the General Assembly, it puts together many sources of threat to humans, which means decentralising the traditional security approach from states to human beings. On pages 1 and 2, an attempt has been made at defining human security:

> (a) 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; (b) Human security calls for people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people and all communities; (c) Human security recognizes the interlinkages between peace, development and human rights, and equally considers civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights; 2 (d) The notion of human security is distinct from the responsibility to protect and its implementation; (e) Human security does not entail the threat or the use of force or coercive measures. Human security does not replace State security; (f) Human security is

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[1]   United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/what-is-human-security/ [accessed: 20.11.2019].

based on national ownership. Since the political, economic, social and cultural conditions for human security vary significantly across and within countries, and at different points in time, human security strengthens national solutions which are compatible with local realities; (g) Governments retain the primary role and responsibility for ensuring the survival, livelihood and dignity of their citizens. The role of the international community is to complement and provide the necessary support to Governments, upon their request, so as to strengthen their capacity to respond to current and emerging threats. Human security requires greater collaboration and partnership among Governments, international and regional organizations and civil society; (h) Human security must be implemented with full respect for the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for the sovereignty of States, territorial integrity and non-interference in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of States. Human security does not entail additional legal obligations on the part of States.

Having read this lengthy excerpt that provides a definition of human security, it is clear to see that there is no definition of the notion at all. Like many other resolutions adopted by the General Assembly, it gives the impression of being loaded with a wealth of words that have just been put together to make it look like the international community cares about human security.[2]

The above resolution dates back to 2012, but the concept and discussions on human security started long before. In another document, whose origins go back to 2009, the definition on the topic tries to be more cohesive.[3] The document also makes an attempt to define the potential threat to human security:

[e]conomic security – persistent poverty, unemployment; food security – hunger, famine; health security – deadly infectious diseases, unsafe food, malnutrition, lack of access to basic health care; environmental security – environmental degradation, resource depletion, natural disasters, pollution; personal security – physical violence, crime, terrorism, domestic violence, child labour; community security – inter-ethnic, religious, and other identity based tensions; political security – political repression, and human rights abuses.[4]

The point here is to underline the difficulty of defining human security – even within the scope of documents launched by the United Nations. Especially since 1994, after the debate around the Human Security Development Report, the definition and the applicability of the concepts at stake have been debated at large.

Looking at a selection of documents issued by the United Nations, as well as several websites of the UN that include information about what human security is, how the concept of human insecurity is undefined, and how to deal with

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2   S. Tadjbakhsh, A.M. Chenoy, *Human security: concepts and implications,* London 2007.

3   *Human Security in Theory and Practice. Application of the Human Security Concept and the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security*, Human Security Unit Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs United Nations, 2009, https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/HSU/Publications%20and%20Products/Human%20Security%20Tools/Human%20Security%20in%20Theory%20and%20Practice%20English.pdf [accessed: 20.11.2019].

4   *Ibid.,* p. 7.

such "risky" situations, there seems to be little or no agreement on the issue even within the organisation itself.

At times, human security seems to be tied to some conflict-threatening situations embedded in some form of security in the traditional way. However, at other times, human security is linked to conflict prevention, and dealing with the causes of conflict. Any initiative undertaken to deal with the underlying causes of human suffering is valid. Having said that, this specific concept of human security is problematic in its own conception.[5]

What is Human Security?

In this section of the paper, an attempt is made to raise a debate about the concept of Human Security, based how it was defined by the UN General Assembly in the document A/RES/66/290. In this sense, it is interesting to scrutinise some of the points that look to define the concept:

> [t]he 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 first question that arises from the above assertion is: "which people?" Many other questions arise from one single paragraph: for example "what is dignity?" Because concepts such as dignity, freedom or fear can be questionable, they can have multiple meanings in different places. This gives rise to more questions, like those about who is the one to define who these vulnerable people are.

Since the resolution was drafted by the General Assembly, it aims to be more "democratic," i.e. it aspires to be not only a document that establishes some guidelines from the Global North to the Global South. Yet this resolution seems shallow, so the next point to be analysed is as follows:

> (d) The notion of human security is distinct from the responsibility to protect and its implementation; (e) Human security does not entail the threat or the use of force or coercive measures. Human security does not replace State security.

This paragraph on the definition of Human Security is more about what Human Security is not, what the members of UN won't do as regards human insecurity. Later, in another paragraph, the document states that the primary goal to protect humans lies on the part of the individual states, and the international community would act to complement them, with some support of the governments. This is in accordance to the UN Charter on no intervention. The next point to be highlighted is also in accordance to the non-intervention, although it raises some questions:

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5   J. Baylis, S. Smith, P. Owens, *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relations,* New York 2007.

(g) Governments retain the primary role and responsibility for ensuring the survival, livelihood and dignity of their citizens. The role of the international community is to complement and provide the necessary support to Governments, upon their request, so as to strengthen their capacity to respond to current and emerging threats. Human security requires greater collaboration and partnership among Governments, international and regional organizations and civil society.

It is understandable that the primary responsibility to keep human security lies on the shoulders of the state. But what if the state is the main perpetrator of atrocities against its population? Or, what if it is an issue affecting a failed state? In this case, maybe there is no government to ask for international help. And what should one say about the so-called "stabilisation" mission carried out by US government in Syria? This "stabilisation" mission took place in Eastern Syria: exactly in two places which at the time were the only places in Syria which Assad's regime wasn't able to control. Even though the human security vocabulary was not evoked, the actions seemed like "human security" was being applied in order to "stabilise" a region and prevent ISIS to get back there.[6] A point to stress here is that the concepts that involve human security are extremely vague. Clearly, applying them with regard to the situation in Syria would imply going against one's own guidelines, and their vagueness leads to the paradox that even the state is uncertain whether or not a given situation is indeed a case to apply the notion of human security.

A priori, the definition of human security, as well as the definition of threats to human security, clearly indicate that this concept was designed to ensure the safety of populations at risk. This, for example, relates to populations that are in the midst of epidemics, extreme poverty, famine, post-conflict situations, post-natural disasters, and so many other threats that are listed in UN documents.

In 2015, the UN released a new document containing what the organisation assured to be a more concise version of the "applicability" of the pillars supporting human security.[7] Due to its vague terminology, once again the document reminds the readers about the "limited" role of UN. However, the document tries to define what would be necessary for the applicability of Human Security. It is clear to see the emptiness of a sentence that reads "affirming human security is a multi-sectoral approach, and demands cooperation, a comprehensive exercise, and so on." This is indeed something close to no definition. After all, there is no definition; for example, what would be a "comprehensive exercise", and who would the cooperation be carried out with?

The document rests on five pillars, which are called fundamental for the human security. These principles are people-centred; comprehensive; context-specific; prevention-oriented, and to bring protection and empowerment. Without being

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6   S. Heydemann, *Rethinking Stabilization in Eastern Syria: Toward a Human Security Framework,* Atlantic Council, 2018, p. 2.

7   *Framework for Cooperation for the system-wide application of Human Security.* Prepared by the Human Security Unit, September 2015, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Framework-for-Cooperation-for-the-System-wide-Application-of-Human-Security.pdf [accessed: 20.11.2019].

repetitive, again, there is absolutely no clarity on how these principles could be put into practice.[8]

Human Security: a concept for whom?

The United Nations website related to the Trust Fund for Human Security is supposed to lay down not only the key objectives, but also the major schemes funded by the donations of UN members. Thus, it shows where these initiatives are applied. The website features a world map accompanied by a list of countries which shows the Human Security schemes that are being put into practice.[9]

It is not difficult to note that all the initiatives are centred around the Global South, South America, Africa, parts of Asia, Middle East, Eurasia, as well as a part of Europe which is not exactly Europe, like Kosovo, Albania, Moldova, Belarus, and a few others. It is really hard not to notice that Brazil is on the list of countries that require international help. The list contains many countries, so it is complicated to select one to look into deeper. In this sense, Brazil has been chosen.

As the research about the applicability of Human Security in Brazil took place, the website of the scheme was accessed for deeper analysis. The UN Trust Fund for Human Security stablished a plan for the city of São Paulo. The project began in August 2008 and lasted until July 2012, the budget oscillating around 3,228,984 USD. The description of the project is the following:

> [s]ustained improvement of human security in the city of Sao Paulo through humanization actions in public schools, health services and communities. he programme aimed to reduce violence and promote a culture of peace in Sao Paulo. Through a comprehensive set of interventions in the areas of education, health care and community participation, networks of participants designed action plans to address issues related to gender, race, ethnicity, youth and local development. As a result, integrated public policies based on the human security approach were developed, resulting in greater impact and improved relations between communities and the Government.[10]

Besides this information, there are no further mentions of what exactly was done in São Paulo from 2008 to 2012. Clearly, the city of São Paulo is one of the biggest urban areas in Brazil, and one of the most populous areas in the world. In a huge urban organism like this, not only is it possible to question where the initiatives actually took place, but what happened to such an extensive budget as one of 3,228,984 USD. It is indeed a city with many problems, mainly social, and in this sense this budget would not make much difference in the scenario. Besides,

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8   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

9   See: United Nations Trust Fund – Programmes, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/trustfund [accessed: 20.11.2019].

10   United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security – city of São Paulo, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/hsprogramme/sustained-improvement-of-human-security-in-the-city-of-sao-paulo-through-humanization-actions-in-public-schools-health-services-and-communities [accessed: 20.11.2019].

the UN does not provide crucial information on aspects such as e.g. who was responsible for the programme, and/or how the budget was spent.

Doubtless, Human Security is important for communities in distress: to relieve people from suffering. Still, looking more closely at the issue, it seems like a "red herring" which is aimed to deviate the attention of the international agenda that is really getting attention, and those issues are being debated on the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, it is important not to forget the relevance of keeping the discussion alive.

Let us get back to the question in point: "Human Security: an idea for whom?"[11] While the threats listed include climate change, poverty, diseases epidemics, terrorism, ethnical problems, so on and so forth.[12] It is clear that the problems come from the Global South, and they actually threaten the Global North too. Because in the end, extreme poverty in the Global South and others issues in these areas can impact the Global North, after all immigration to the developed countries is one of the troubles for the rich countries. Spreading a few crumbs to contain these people from the Global South can actually protect the Global North, and not the other way around.[13] While it should not be about fear of the foreign, but also what multiculturalism can aggregate.

What is next?

Criticism is not going to stop, given the vagueness of the United Nations when it comes to putting forward a definition and a *modus operandi* of the applicability of Human Security. Another thing that must be stressed here is that UN documents admit that the projects are "context-based", but they are not. They are a disguised from of implementation in practical and abstract ways of the Western Modernity[14] on the Global South. According to a broadly postcolonial and ontological security approach, whatever the concept of Human Security encompasses, it should really be context-based; otherwise it is just creating modern-anxiety.[15] Although it is necessary to highlight not only the Global South in the scope of Human Security, partially the Global North also falls within the definition of Human Security, and it is passive to UN initiatives too.[16] As can be seen on the United Nations Trust Fund website, there are many projects that are being implemented in the Global North, but it is not the nodal point here to exhaust all points regarding this topic.

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[11]   S. Tadjbahksh, 'Human Security: Concepts and Implications with an Application to Post-Intervention Challenges in Afghanistan', *Les Etudes du CERI*, no. 117–118, 2005.

[12]   S.N. Romaniuk, M. Thapa, P. Marton (eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies,* Springer Nature Living Reference, 2019.

[13]   A heated debate has been going on over this topic, although this is not the nodal point of this paper.

[14]   A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity; Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Cambridge 1991.

[15]   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[16]   United Nations Trust Fund, https://www.un.org/humansecurity/trustfund [accessed: 20.11.2019].

For now, what involves the notion of Human Security seems to be a way of disciplining the "rest,"[17] a way of spreading neoliberalism and imposing existential anxiety. After all, while a part of the world defines who is in a situation of insecurity and imposes ways of "fixing" such regions, they may not constitute their own identity. Yet mirroring the modern Western development teleology, we long for a certain status that will probably never be attained. On the contrary, it can create even more insecurity and frustration. This is another reason to think that Human Security deserves so many criticism given the way it is being conducted at the moment. It deserves more attention, and it needs to be more articulated to fit diverse culturally-based projects. After all, humans matter.

This brief analysis was meant to stir debate, rather than just to provide an answer to the issues raised. There are nodal points concerning Human Security and its tangents that have not been discussed here. They include the object of security, the kind of security, mapping the impacts of the projects,[18] and many other issues that are not within the scope of this paper, although much more can and needs to be said and done in this respect.

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[17] G. Shani, 'Human security as ontological security: a post-colonial approach', *Postcolonial Studies,* vol. 20, no. 3, 2017, pp. 275–293.

[18] A. Acharya, S.K. Singhdeo, M., Rajaretnam, 'Preface – Human Security: From Concept to Practice – Case Studies from Northeast India and Orissa', *World Scientific Series on Human Security* 2011, vol. 1.

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Human security: zaprojektowany cynizm czy źle wdrożony pomysł?
Streszczenie

Pojęcie *human security* weszło do agendy międzynarodowej w 1994 r. Moment nie mógł być bardziej sprzyjający dla przesunięcia debaty na temat spraw ludzkich w stronę problematyki bezpieczeństwa i uwzględnienia innego podejścia do bezpieczeństwa. Należy przyznać, że wczesne lata 90. były w dużej mierze naznaczone końcem zimnej wojny, co położyło kres wysokiemu poziomowi niepewności między państwami. W tym czasie, chociaż nadal istniały napięcia między państwami i jednostkami wewnątrzpaństwowymi, były populacje zaniedbywane przez długi czas w kwestiach bezpieczeństwa. Głównym celem artykułu jest analiza różnorodnych oficjalnych dokumentów wydanych przez ONZ dotyczących *human security* oraz, w ramach nadrzędnego celu prowadzonych badań, przyjrzenie się koncepcji *human security* i jej zastosowaniu.

Słowa kluczowe: bezpieczeństwo jednostki ludzkiej, ONZ, zastosowanie

Human Security: Designed Cynicism, or a Poorly Implemented Idea?
Abstract

The notion of Human Security entered the most prominent international agenda in 1994. The moment could not be more conducive to the debate on human issues to broadly shift the debate towards security issues, and to include another safety approach. Admittedly, the early 1990s were largely marked by the end of the Cold War, which put a stop to the high level of insecurity between the states. At that time, although there were still tensions between states and intra-state units, there were populations in distress that had been neglected for a long time. The primary goal of this paper is to scrutinise a variety of official documents issued by the United Nations regarding human security, and, as part of the overriding objective of the research conducted, to look at the concept of Human Security and its applicability.

Key words: human security, United Nations, applicability

Human security: entworfener Zynismus oder eine schlecht umgesetzte Idee?
Zusammefassung

Das Konzept Human Security wurde im Jahre 1994 auf die internationale Agenda gehoben. Es konnte keinen günstigereren Moment geben für eine Debatte, die menschliche Angelegenheiten und in die Sicherheitsthematik einbezog und andere Ansätze von Sicherheit berücksichtigte Die frühen 90er Jahre waren offensichtlich in hohem Maße von dem Ende des Kalten Krieges geprägt, wodurch der besonders hohe Grad an Unsicherheit zwischen den Staaten beendet wurde. In jener Zeit traten die mit Blick auf Sicherheitsfragen vernachlässigten Bevölkerungen in den Blick, obwohl immer noch Spannungen zwischen und in den Staaten existierten, Hauptziel des Artikels ist die Analyse verschiedener offizieller, durch die Vereinten Nationen ausgegebenen Dokumente zur human security und, im Rahmen des vorrangigen Forschungsziels, ein genauer Blick auf das Konzept von human security und seine Anwendung.

Schlüsselwörter: menschliche Sicherheit, die Vereinten Nationen, die Anwendung

Human security: запроектированный цинизм или плохо реализованная идея?
Резюме

Концепция human security (безопасность человека, безопасность личности) появилась в международной повестке дня в 1994 году. Это был очень благоприятный момент для начала дискуссии о привлечения широких масс людей к проблемам безопасности. Следует вспомнить, что начало 90-х гг. было связанно с окончанием холодной войны, которое положило конец высокому уровню неопределенности между государствами. В то время, хотя все еще присутствовала напряженность между отдельными государствами и внутригосударственные конфликты, существовали большие группы людей, которые не интересовались вопросами безопасности. Основной целью статьи является анализ различных официальных документов ООН, касающихся human security, изучение концепции human security и ее применение.

Ключевые слова: безопасность человека, ООН, применение