

Human security

Human security, approach to national and international security that gives primacy to human beings and their complex social and economic interactions.

The concept of human security represents a departure from orthodox security studies, which focus on the security of the state. The subjects of the human security approach are individuals, and its end goal is the protection of people from traditional (i.e., military) and nontraditional threats such as poverty and disease. Moving the security agenda beyond state security does not mean replacing it but rather involves complementing and building on it. Central to this approach is the understanding that human security deprivations can undermine peace and stability within and between states, whereas an overemphasis on state security can be detrimental to human welfare. The state remains a central provider of security, but state security is not a sufficient condition for human welfare.

Human security fully entered the policy and academic debates in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, despite its widespread usage within national and international policy circles, its definition remains highly contested. The holistic vision of protecting the security of people lends itself to a variety of interpretations shaped by relative understandings of what constitutes a threat to the security of individuals, how the intensity and repercussion of any given threat can be measured (i.e., historical data or forward-looking forecasts), and by what possible means the threat can be prevented or removed. The coalition of states and supranational organizations that have supported the approach can count numerous accomplishments, such as the Ottawa Convention (i.e., Mine Ban Treaty), the establishment of the International Criminal Court, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

Origins and development

The idea of extending the concept of security from state security to individual human beings was first articulated by the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues in 1982. The Common Security report provided the first comprehensive criticism of the purely military approach to security while highlighting the need to devote due attention to the relation between security and the well-being of individuals. After years of latency, a crucial point in history for the development of the concept is the end of the Cold War and the revitalization of long-standing bottom-up arguments within progressive academic and policy circles, once it was

realized that the disappearance of the superpowers' military threats did not necessarily entail an enhanced level of security for citizens within states. The evolution of the security discourse was also molded by the need to address the global social problems arising within the context of a globalizing world. The potential threats to individuals' lives and well-being were therefore extended from being primarily military to broadly encompass economic, social, environmental, and health concerns.

In connection with the immediate post-Cold War period and the new development agenda, the first authoritative definition of human security was provided in 1994 when Mahbub ul Haq drew attention to the concept in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Report. Beyond territorial and military concerns, the report argued that human security is fundamentally concerned with human life and dignity. For analytical purposes, UNDP disentangled its four main characteristics: it is universal, its components are interdependent, it is best ensured through prevention, and it is people-centred. On the more substantive level, the definition of human security given in the report remained broad and all-encompassing. For UNDP, human security meant safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, and it meant protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life. Understood in these terms, human security has also been encapsulated in the "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want" policy axiom. Although acknowledging the varying intensity of possible threats to human welfare, UNDP grouped these threats in seven nonexhaustive and nonexclusive security categories—community, economic, environmental, food, health, personal, and political. Despite the broadness and the apparent conceptual weaknesses of the definition provided by the report, the general prescriptions outlined therein provided a useful springboard for academic inquiry and remained a useful organizing concept for the work of international organizations throughout the 1990s.

Criticism and debate

The 1994 UNDP report opened an outlet for the academic redefinition of human security. Numerous scholars attempted to disentangle the dimensions of what immediately appeared to be an overly unrestrained analytical tool, which, by virtue of its all-encompassing nature, could lose its meaning. A number of scholars worked toward a recategorization of what could be classified a threat to human security.

The reconceptualization of human security engaged scholars in a fierce academic debate—some in favour of narrowing the concept to a valuable essence and some wanting to preserve

its holistic character. On the grounds of analytical rigour, pragmatism, and policy relevance, some experts argued that the sole denominator for the human security agenda should be a focus on violent threats. In this view, a listlike description of any possible “bad thing” that could happen to individuals is a peril to conceptual clarity and renders causal analysis virtually impossible. Advocates of the broad theorization opposed this approach. They argued that once the referent of the security agenda becomes the individual, it is impossible to disentangle violent threats to individuals from other issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, and infectious diseases that directly impinge on the safety, freedom, and self-realization of human beings. In this view, human security means not only meeting basic needs but also the realization of human dignity. Other scholars offer a middle approach, bridging the narrow and broad conceptualizations. They produced an analytical scheme including only those elements that, in their view, human beings might fight over or risk their lives for.

The debate is far from settled and remains a source of controversy. In particular, all the attempts that have been made to sharpen the definition of human security had to confront the exclusive problems of either attaching a value and a priority to possible potential threats to human life and vaguely justifying such a choice or of maintaining the undefined connotations embedded in the original proposal while losing analytical rigour.

International initiatives for human security

Human security has entered the policy discourse of a number of governments. Notable examples are Canada and Japan during the 1990s and early 2000s. Each provided a slightly different definition of the concept and customized its application to best suit its individual interests. The government of Japan subscribed to a comprehensive understanding of human security—one that covers all the aspects that potentially endanger survival, daily life, and human dignity. On the other hand, the Canadian government, led by former foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy, adhered to a narrower but still open-ended definition of human security that distinguishes “freedom from fear” from “freedom from want” while acknowledging their distinctiveness and mutual interdependence.

An attempt to institutionalize the human security agenda internationally created the Human Security Network, a result of a bilateral agreement between Canada and Norway in 1998; 13 other countries and one observer later joined the initiative. This intergovernmental forum was created so as to advance and embed further the human security agenda within global governance, with the end goal of creating a more humane world free from fear and want and

where people can fully develop their human potential. The network was intended to serve as a forum for dialogue and research and, above all, as an avenue to share evolving understandings and practices to advance the development of the human security approach. Substantively, the policy proceedings resulting from yearly ministerial meetings provided general guidelines for states where the safety and well-being of citizens were endangered; they also helped legitimize the UN's overarching framework for the human security approach. Yet beyond this "coalition of the willing," very few states embraced the approach and used it as reference for their domestic and foreign policies.

At the supranational level, the UN played a crucial role in defining, supporting, and translating the new security paradigm from idea into practice. Alongside the UN, other international organizations demonstrated interest in the agenda. Both James Wolfensohn, a former president of the World Bank, and Michael Camdessus, a former managing director of the International Monetary Fund, expressed a commitment to policy and institutional reforms in line with the human security paradigm by means of expanding representation within the respective institutions and by extending ownership of developmental policies to individual communities. The extent to which these people-centred reforms will have an effect in eliminating want remains questionable; having reached a certain maturity, the reforms have not resolved the gross distributional problems that lay at the heart of global inequality and individual security.

Catia Gregoratti

CITATION INFORMATION

ARTICLE TITLE: Human security

WEBSITE NAME: Encyclopaedia Britannica

PUBLISHER: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

DATE PUBLISHED: 14 December 2018

URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-security>

ACCESS DATE: April 22, 2020