The term "Human security": Why policymakers use it; Some notes on how to define it

1.Why human security? General observations[1]

The term "human security" is increasingly used in international politics. It has been made into a centerpiece of the foreign policy of some states, notably Canada and Japan, it is present in foreign policy statements by the EU as well as Sweden, and has become an important part of the UN vocabulary.[2] There is an increased focus on the concept also within the NGO and academic communities.[3] The concept will in the light of an increased terrorist threat probably show even more relevant. The focus on human security signals most of all an increased emphasis on sub-state entities, in particular the individual person, as points of reference for what is right and wrong. This trend is caused by a number of factors that will not disappear anytime soon.

First and perhaps foremost, present-day internal wars have demonstrated that innocent civilians continue to pay the highest price in terms of death, maiming, displacement and so on. In modern internal wars, civilians are indeed often a main military target, for strategic or other reasons. No matter who is to blame for their suffering, there is an increasing international consensus, partly due to the effects of globalization, that war victims must be protected no matter what. Human security is a new and straightforward way of putting what is at stake. As such it can be an important term for advocacy and action.

Second, human rights have continued to strengthen its position in international politics. It is a regime to which most leaders pledge allegiance, at least in words. Although human security is, one could argue, a broader concept, it is closely related to human rights — we do not have a right to everything that makes us secure, but the enjoyment of human rights in many ways means increased human security. Just as is the case with human rights, human security is often about the safety and dignity of the individual as opposed to the group or other aggregates, in particular the state.

Human security as a policy objective could indeed show to be a pragmatic route towards protecting the individual's life and dignity, signaling, as it does, that at issue is protecting humans almost no matter who is to blame, almost no matter politics. In this sense, human security has the potential of putting humans before politics, something that cannot, unfortunately, be said about human rights which today has become a highly politicized theme. It is also a concept that can account for the many kinds of threats against human life and dignity that are not — at least primarily — about human rights violations (for instance natural disasters) but which still require common and decisive action.

Third, a carefully formulated concept of human security has the potential of clarifying central issues in connection to an intensified debate about humanitarian intervention vs. state sovereignty. Where, is it asked, should a line be drawn when outrages against civilians — massive physical violence or other deadly threats — must compel the international community to take action against the will of a host government? A clear concept of human security can help drawing such a line.

To be sure, it has already been said that human security is yet another term that the North will use for intervening in and dominating the South, and the track record of humanitarian intervention is far from void of non-humanitarian motives such as strategic and economic agendas. Thus, in developing and using the human security concept, particularly in reference to humanitarian intervention, carefulness is called for.[4]

Fourth, the post Cold War era has meant more attention to a broadened security agenda, the different parts of which are more interconnected than before. National security in the sense of strategic-military issues, is no longer the predominant, at least not the only, preoccupation of states. Other issues such as terrorism, global crime, environmental hazards, the social effects of global economic ups and downs, threats to information technology, ethnic strife etc., have

entered the security agenda of states, often under the general heading of globalization.

While this per se does not call for a concept of human security, the latter is instrumental for gauging the whole security concept and making it more complete and up to the challenges of modern times. Making place for it on the security agenda potentially clarifies the relation between different levels of aggregation as well as horizontally between different security spheres or themes, and so helps in building a more all-encompassing security concept at the same time as putting the individual human person at focus.

For instance, in the internal wars of today, security challenges are present on several levels of aggregation, e.g. the state, the group (e.g. a certain minority), and individuals, and they are related to each other, often intricately so. Such wartime challenges can concern threats to physical security of civilians, a humanitarian crisis for a whole population, threats to the cultural survival and identity of a certain minority, assaults on the integrity of national symbols, environmental threats on a regional level, the integrity of a state etc. An adequately formulated concept of human security well placed in a broader security concept can help to organize thinking about such manifold security challenges at the same time as putting the welfare of the individual person at the center, also in policy.

One of the main policy challenges of today is indeed how to relate security on different levels in a reinforcing manner and make policy abide to the fact that security is indivisible. Policymakers must increasingly acknowledge security at state or group levels can ultimately be pursued only on the basis of the security of the individual person or, in other words, human security. States are not secure – in particular from within, but sometimes also from the outside – without its minorities and citizens being secure in the full meaning of the term. The lack of such security for groups and individuals can put the legitimacy of the state into question and make the state vulnerable to internal dissent as well as external criticism and possibly action.

The horrifying events of September 11th, 2001, have demonstrated that literally no-one is safe, and that terrorists see massacres of civilians – either by physical force or by biological, chemical or other agents – as a legitimate means for making their stated ideological outlook and political aims (if they indeed deserve that name) known to the world. As is since long the case in most acts of terror whether a state, certain group or individual is the perpetrator, defenseless individuals are on the receiving end. As fighting terrorism is also a question of national and indeed global security, this "new" threat has put into motion a multifaceted security problematique where human security assumes a central place.

Fifth, under the broad heading of conflict management, a host of concepts are today in use – preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, rehabilitation, reconstruction, peace-building etc. Much would be gained by greater clarity in the use of these and related terms, in particular how such policies relate to each other on the ground. A clear formulation of that which the many facets of conflict management ideally are out to safeguard – human security – could serve to organize thinking as well as policies. It could provide common grounds for actors involved in a certain aspect of conflict management, in order for them to identify their respective human security niche and co-ordinate policies with other actors, e.g. peacekeepers vs. humanitarian agencies. In other words, human security as a common policy aim could help improve the *efficiency* of conflict management.

Moreover, the safeguarding of human security could be that which ultimately bestows conflict management efforts with *legitimacy*. Conflict management – whether it is about early conflict prevention through efforts of socio-economic or political-institutional development or through preventive diplomacy, or about crisis management such as military deployment in a conflict zone, or about more long-term efforts of post-conflict rehabilitation, reconstruction and reconciliation – must ultimately be about furthering human security rather than e.g. strategic or economic interests if they are to enjoy legitimacy. Without legitimacy, perspectives for the success of conflict management are weak.

Sixth, and in near reference to the last point, *conflict prevention* is today put forward by international organizations, states, NGOs, even busi-

ness, as an overriding international concern. Human security has the potential of being a policy instrument in preventive efforts. This can only happen, however, if the concept is given a broad enough definition that would account for threats that often occur at early stages of conflict. We are not talking here about deadly threats to survival, which of course are prevalent during armed phases of conflict that prevention is meant to make not happen in the first place. Prevention must earlier on address other kinds of threats against human security, which, if not efficiently addressed, can contribute, to destabilization and a progress toward armed conflict. Such threats are of a socioeconomic kind, e.g. poverty, destitution, illiteracy, and unemployment. Such threats against human security come in the form of discrimination of minorities, cultural or political repression of certain groups or individuals, lack of freedoms etc., thus signaling a weakness of political institutions, democracy and governance. Rightly conceived and executed, prevention thus means early and long-term socio-economic and political-institutional efforts, coupled to long-term diplomatic efforts, which address such such long term human security challenges

Last, but not least, the human security concept potentially approximates a formula of relevance to all humanity, to everyone no matter rich or poor, no matter North or South. Furthermore, it is a *bottom-up* approach that puts human beings and people and their multifaceted security needs before institutions and states which for too long have been the almost exclusive focus of many top-down approaches in analysis and policymaking.

2. What is human security?

Promoting human security means caring for the individual human being. Thus, when building the concept, a point of departure must be accounting for salient sides of the human individual's existence, challenges to which represent challenges to human security. We must stay put on the level of the individual when defining the concept, the next step, of course, being linkage to other levels as well as to policy.

The literature is inconclusive on how human security is to be defined, and there are as of yet only a few systematic endeavors on the problem within the academic community. An early formulation by UNDP[5] is still influential, but numerous lists and conceptualizations have been proposed, with a marked increase of efforts over the last couple of years. A common criticism is that the concept is often given a too wide definition, thereby including "everything" and ridding the concept from meaning and analytical value. Others insist that in order for human security to have a value added, it must be broad, but also specific—an impossible combination, it seems.[6]

While concepts must have a clear delimitation, this does not necessarily conflict with the ambition to mold them as workable representations of the real world. A human security concept must indeed be sufficiently broad to reflect salient aspects of the multifaceted human condition. This is particularly the case if the concept of human security is to achieve its potential as an organizing principle for the wide range of policy instruments. The remedy against overburdening of the concept seems to be clarity on which aspect of human security is at issue in each instance. Moreover, a broad formulation does not mean including "everything", providing the concept is built on a sound basis.

There are numerous ways to posit such a basis. One approach is presented by needs theory. This is a tradition of fairly long standing within the social sciences, with one of its first exponents in the psychologist Abraham Maslow. Needs theory is not uncontroversial, but is fairly regularly seen in the social science literature.[7] Moreover, the needs concept is in abundant use among policy makers, including in international politics. For instance, in December 2001, the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan ended his Nobel Peace Price lecture saying, "...beneath the surface of States and nations, ideas and language, lies the fate of individual human beings in need. Answering their needs will be the mission of the United Nations in the century to come."[8]

It is here argued that achieving security at the level of the individual person by and large means safeguarding the satisfaction of human needs. This is in particular the case if strategies to sat-

isfy needs come under threat, which leads to responses to safeguard, in various ways, *the security* of such solutions. This point of departure gives the following picture in reference to human security:[9]

1. Security most evidently means being free from physical threat against and assaults on one's own body and, perhaps, against such persons or objects to which one has a close psychological linkage, e.g. family members, close friends and relatives, one's home etc. We can call it *physical security*.

2. Security also means something more long term and sometimes less obvious. It means being free from hunger, cold, dehydration, disease, epidemics, environmental hazards etc. – we can call it the urge to maintain bodily health or homeostasis, or *physiological security*. Just as physical security, this kind of security is also about the body, but it is more long term, more structural, and the agent causing the threat and suffering can be more difficult to identify. From a medical point of view, threats against physiological security have their effect on the level of cells and the functioning of organs, while the effects on the human body of physical violence usually are more massive and generalized.

Many would stop here when defining human security. In order for a more complete picture to emerge, it is, however, necessary to include two more themes.

3. A third theme of human security is the socio-economic one. This is about having a job, an income, a home, financial savings for the future, an education etc. We must include such things and call it e.g. *socio-economic security* if we are to build a complete and policy-relevant concept of human security.

4. A fourth human security theme is about something utterly vital to our existence, but also so frail that it can be swiftly threatened by e.g. the stroke of a pen in a presidential decree. It is about freedom from interference in one's privacy and one's chosen way of life, whether it is about expression, religion, cultural affiliations, political beliefs, sexual orientation etc. In the West and many other places, it goes under the heading of "liberty", "freedom", "personal integrity" etc. A useful overall term against a background of potential or actual challenge to such values might be *existential security*.

Infringements on such existential themes as the individual person's "way of life", including identity, are intimately linked to similar themes on aggregate levels – e.g. national identity, cultural traditions of a minority – and to a problematique with broad political, including security, ramifications. Such aggregate themes are indeed often that which we are particularly prepared to fight for, including with arms, in the name of the group, the nation etc.

In sum, these four security categories represent something that one way or the other must be accounted for under the heading of human security; if we seek a concept that is relevant and looks to the whole, we must venture such a broad formulation.

Moreover, the categories represent a conceptualization that articulates important aspects of a common humanity – this is important if the human security concept is to become a broadly accepted policy instrument. The outlined four security spheres or categories indeed allow for a formulation of a human security problematique of relevance to the poor and marginalized as well as the affluent and powerful parts of the world.

This Western writer is surely inclined to underline the importance of the individual, something which is perhaps most evident – and problematic – in reference to the existential security category. In many places, the individual is less a point of reference than is the collective, particularly when it comes to existential themes. However, neither the proposed existential theme, nor any of the other three themes, necessarily close out the possibility of some aspects of security finding their solution at some other level than the individual's. The above formulation of human security, starting from a model of human needs, merely suggests that individuals, in order to stay and feel secure, must solve a certain problematique which can be divided into four categories. Whether such solutions happen by own choice or by what e.g. tradition or collective ideals dictate is another story.

The presented four categories by and large account for the twofold formulation "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want", which was

used by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at the Millenium Summit in September 2000 and adopted as a basis for the work of the Commission on Human Security.[10] The former is said to account for the security agenda, and the latter the development agenda. While the proposed four categories covers these two themes, they also demonstrate that there is a considerable overlap between the two – something which indeed is in line with current calls for linking up, or at least better coordinating, the two policy areas.

Thus, while "freedom from want", i.e. developmental issues, traditionally have been geared at socioeconomic – and therefore "material" – goods, i.e. *socioeconomic security*, it is ever more evident that development also means good governance, strong institutions, democracy, a strengthened civil society, and not only in order to achieve improvements in the socioeconomic sphere, but also in order for individuals freedoms and dignity to be safeguarded. In the latter case we thus, in terms of human security, move into the realm of *existential security*. This category of human security can also be relevant for "freedom of fear", e.g. in situations of serious political repression. Commonly, such repression also feature physical abuse, i.e. assaults on *physical security*, a category which falls by and large within the security agenda. Furthermore, the human security category of *physiological security* is relevant in an acute humanitarian crisis during e.g. armed conflict, i.e. in the realm of a security agenda, when many fear serious hunger, disease etc. This category is of course still an issue, even if more long-term, under the development agenda, e.g. in terms of improved health care, nutrition etc.[11]

3. Putting human security to work

In sum, for establishing human security as a useful term for advocacy and action, the challenge is foremost to take stock of current trends and put them into a new and innovative language and form which can demonstrate e.g. linkages between issue areas. This in particular concerns the relation of human security to a "new" and broadened security agenda, the relation between human rights and human security, and the debate on humanitarian intervention or "the responsibility to protect.". The term human security can help organize thinking and policies on conflict management, including peace support operations in a conflict zone, and increase both efficiency and legitimacy. On the issue of conflict prevention, human security can indeed show to be the very stuff of early warning and response.

In trying to insert the human security term into programs of action, we cannot, however, avoid taking a close look at what human security really is, i.e. we must pay due attention to conceptual issues, and, while doing that, we must stay put on the level of the human individual.

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Notes

1. Many of the points here are drawn from the author's up-coming dissertation at the Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden. It has the working title "The anatomy of wartime human misery: Presenting a framework for the analysis of threats against and assaults on human security during times of internal conflict." In one chapter of the thesis, a two-dimensional model of human security is presented.

2. See e.g. Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada (1999a) and (1900b), and the homepage of The Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan. The latter was instrumental for the establishment of the Commission on Human Security – see materials on www.humansecurity-chs.org. For the term's use by Sweden, see e.g. Ministry for Foreign Affairs, (2000), chapter 4. For the term's use by the UN, see e.g. Annan (2001a), (1999a) and (1999b) where direct or indirect references to the term abound; for a critique of the term's use by the UNHCR, see e.g. Hammerstad (2000).

3. Examples of an intensified academic focus on the concept are The Program on Human Security at Harvard University Center (www.cbrss.harvard.edu/programs/hsecurity.htm), and The Common Security Forum, a network of scholars and practitioners for the exploration of post Cold War security issues, incl. human security (www.kings. cam.ac.uk/histecon/ and www.hsph.harvard.edu/ hcpds/). As for litera-

ture, one of the first accounts of the concept by UNDP (1994) was followed by several articles and books, in particular during recent years. Recent texts include Gobarah et al (2001), King et al (2000), McRae et al (2001), Paris (2001), Stoett (1999), Thomas (2001) and (2000). For a valuable "extended and annotated international bibliography", see Edson (2001).

4. Human security is discussed by The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty in its recent report about humanitarian intervention, *The Responsibility to Protect* (2001), p 15.

5. UNDP (1994), p 24, proposed seven themes: Economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. A problem is that this definition in several instances, e.g. political security, leaves the realm of the individual person to include problems that surely have a bearing on the security of the individual, but which represent problematiques on aggregate levels.

6. In the framework this brief paper, there is no place for discussing the various definitions. Paris (2001), p 89 ff, in discussing several approaches to the concept, laments the several "laundry list" definitions of the concept and overly "expansive definitions". In seeking more systemacy, e.g. Thomas (2001) points to a qualitative-quantitative dimension in the concept, while King et al (2000), p 1, define it as "the expected numbers of years of future life spent outside the state of 'generalized poverty'." For a summary of efforts to define the term, se Edson (2001).

7. Examples of fairly recent date are King (1998), Gough (1994), Doyal and Gough (1991), and Braybrooke (1987).

8. Annan (2001a).

9. The following security categories, and how they relate to a model of human needs, are presented in much greater detail in this author's up-coming dissertation. There, a dynamic model on human security is presented which demonstrates i.a. how the presented four categories are continuous and to some degree overlapping, and how they can be linked to a discussion about conflict management. At focus is in particular "the anatomy" of wartime threats against and assaults on human security, and of the prevention, inhibition and alleviation of such threats and assaults.

10. See e.g. The Report of the Commissions First Meeting at Whithney Greentree Estate, New York 8 to 10 June 2001 (www.humansecurity-chs.org).

11. My forthcoming thesis lays out in detail the dynamics of how the human security agenda shifts during the course of conflict.

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