

# The uncertain future of human security in the UN

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## Introduction

The Westphalian contract between the state and its citizens has proved insufficient to fully protect citizens from the wide range of threats that vast numbers of people currently face. People are vulnerable to a far wider range of harms than those that threaten state integrity, and states are too often either unwilling or unable to adequately protect their citizens. This failure has led many to advocate a shift in security thinking and policy from a focus on the state to the individual. One concept, human security, makes the individual itself the referent of security. This chapter focuses on the discursive and policy debates surrounding this shift as articulated in the United Nations (UN) system.

The concept of human security has permeated virtually all aspects of the post-Cold War discourse on international peace and security. Whether through development studies, international relations theory, models of global governance, sustainable development policy or practices of military intervention, the notion that humans, rather than states, should be at the centre of security policy has entered, if not been entirely accepted, in contemporary scholarship and policy. Central in this discourse is the UN. The UN has in many ways served as an incubator for the concept of human security, pushing the referential shift at both the macro institutional level and in its

branches, and incorporating it into many aspects of its evolving post-Cold War mandate.

However, while it was widely used by UN branch organisations throughout the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, the concept of human security has yet to gain mainstream acceptance in either the field of international relations, or the international security policy-making discourse. This is in part due to the sheer dominance of the traditional security paradigm – any change will necessarily be slow but, as I argue,

it is also due to a failure of proponents of human security to clearly articulate what human security is, and what mechanisms must be used to mitigate a new generation of security threats. This is particularly true in the UN system. The version of the concept introduced in the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Development Report raised interest, but failed to find a solid and

workable place in the UN system. By the time of Kofi Annan's 2005 Secretary-General Report on UN reform, the term had all but dropped from the principal UN agenda (Annan 2005). In addition, the UN has not produced a universally accepted definition, and while some states, such as Canada and Norway have embraced the concept, there is considerable reluctance by many UN member states, including major Security Council powers as well as many developing nations, to endorse what some see as a challenge to the sovereign rights of states.

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My intentions in this overview chapter are threefold. First, I document the post-Cold War history of the UN's use of human security using 12 major reports released over the past 15 years. Rather than grouping all uses of the concept into particular camps based on their perspective on human security, I attempt to articulate a linear, as opposed to dichotomous, map of human security's conceptual evolution within the UN.

Second, I outline what I believe are three challenges facing the concept of human security within the UN system: the ambiguity surrounding the concept and practice of development and of human security, the lack of clarity between human rights and human security and the potential conceptual overstretch of the UN's use of human security.

Third, I explore two alternative ways of conceptualising human security in order to address these three concerns. I first review what I believe to be the most sophisticated articulation of the narrow, or violence-based, definition of human security – Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong's definition of human security as freedom from organised physical violence. I then present an alternative, in the form of the threshold-based definition of human security, and show how this conceptualisation helps to identify security threats as well as demonstrate how it can be used to counter the three concerns emerging from the UN analysis.

The UN has been at the centre of the debate over human security since its first substantive articulation in 1994. More than any other institution or state, it uniquely embodies the mechanisms necessary to operationalise this shift in the theory and practice of security. An assessment of the state of human security in the UN system therefore serves as a useful and necessary barometer of the concept at large.

## Evolution of human security in the UN

In order to get a sense of the evolution of the concept of human security in the UN system, I first outline the use of the concept, as well as other broad security conceptualisations, in a series of major UN reports that have used the term. The overview addresses the following documents:

- 1992 Boutros Boutros-Ghali's *Agenda for peace*
- 1993 UNDP Human Development Report: *People's participation*
- 1994 UNDP Human Development Report: *New dimensions of human security*
- 1995 UN *The report of the world social summit for social development*
- 1995 Commission on Global Governance *Our global neighbourhood*
- 1997 UNHCR *State of the world's refugees: a humanitarian agenda*
- 1999 Kofi Annan *On the protection of civilians in armed conflict*. Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council
- 2000 Kofi Annan *We the peoples*
- 2001 Commission on Human Security – *Human security now*
- 2004 Kofi Annan. *A more secure world: our shared responsibility*. Report of the Secretary General's High-level Panel on threats, challenges and change.
- 2005 Kofi Annan. *In larger freedom – towards security, development and human rights for all*
- 2005 UN World Summit *Outcome document*

The first major indication of where the UN fitted into the shifting post-Cold War security realignment came in Boutros Boutros-Ghali's 1992 report: *An agenda for peace* (Boutros-Ghali 1992). This report, followed by the more action oriented 1995 *Supplement to the Agenda for Peace*, (Boutros-Ghali 1995), is a good example of the UN grappling with the role they will play in the new security environment. While the term "human security" is not used in the report, this document represents the first important shift towards a much broader protection mandate for the UN.

The report was written in a period of significant re-assessment in the UN system. The largest ever environmental conference, the UN Conference on Environment and Development, had just been held in Rio de Janeiro, and the Second World Conference on Human Rights was about to take place. Both addressed individual protection in a very different light than at any time during the Cold War, and both put the UN at the centre of this quickly evolving global reconfiguration of security concepts.

Ostensibly to analyse and recommend “ways of strengthening and making more efficient . . . the capacity of the UN for preventive diplomacy, for peacemaking and for peace-keeping”, the *Agenda for peace* was a reaction to the removal of the ideological barrier to UN intervention that existed during the Cold War. In the early 1990s it became clear that the world remained rife with civil conflict. These conflicts required complex peace operations bringing together a much wider range of actors, including international organisations, non-governmental and regional organisations, states and the private sector. As Oliver Richmond states, “such coordinated action implies that there is a common, perhaps even universal, basis for such action” (Richmond 1991, p.42). *The Agenda for peace* consequently included with major sections covering preventative diplomacy, peacemaking and peacekeeping.

The concept of security articulated in this report, however, goes considerably further in its threat inclusion. The report states that the “new dimension of security” must include: “unchecked population growth, crushing debt burdens, barriers to trade, drugs and the growing disparity between rich and poor. Poverty, disease, famine, oppression” (Boutros-Ghali 1992, p.3). The report goes on to say that “a porous ozone shield could pose a greater threat to an exposed population than a hostile army. Drought and disease can decimate no less mercilessly than the weapons of war” (Boutros-Ghali 1992, p.3).

While articulate in much of its prognosis, the report struggles with some of the main operational challenges of the broadened security agenda. There is no clear articulation of the legitimacy of the use of force for humanitarian purposes, nor on the practical implications of the shift in sovereignty at the centre of the new security environment. These would become major themes of the discourse over the next 15 years.

While the 1994 UNDP *New dimensions of human security* report is cited as the first major UN articulation of human security, the conceptual shift to the protection of people, rather than states, was first made in the 1993 UNDP *Human development report – people’s participation*. The report makes two claims that relate specifically to human security. The first is that people, more than ever, want to participate in

their destiny and that human development depends on this freedom to do so (UNDP 1993). The 1993 UNDP report also argues that this requires a re-conceptualisation of many of the core principles of international relations, including security:

Many old concepts must now be radically revised. Security should be reinterpreted as security for people, not security for land. . . . The concept of security must change – from an exclusive stress on national security to a much greater stress on people’s security, from security through armaments, to security through human development, from territorial security to food, employment and environmental security (UNDP 1993, p.3).

Similar to other statements in the early 1990s, the report links this shift to new articulations of global governance and cooperation, focused on the UN. However, the articulation of this agenda for international change, based on the concept of human security, is left to Chapter 2 of the 1994 report. This report defined the general characteristics of what human security should be and how it could bring together the emerging, but in many ways disparate, post-Cold War UN themes. Second, it proposed means of framing threats to human security through freedom from fear and freedom from want, combined with threat categories. More than just bringing together themes, however, the concept of human security expressed here incorporated the actual activities that the UN was already undertaking: famine relief through the World Food Programme, development through the UNDP, cultural preservation through UNESCO; peacekeeping through the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, emergency assistance through United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and so on.

The 1994 UNDP report was also the first real attempt at providing a definition of human security. The authors did so using three different methods to categorise threats. The first was temporal. Human security means security from both long-term and short-term vulnerabilities. The second was a broad category that has become the basis for much of the human security debate: freedom from fear and freedom from want (UNDP 1994, p.24). The third and most important category was compartmentalising the potential threats to human security. The report

proposed seven human security components: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security (UNDP 1994, pp.22–25). This categorisation set the “boundaries of the tent” very broadly, clearly separating itself from past security re-conceptualisations as well as forcing future definitions of human security to justify their narrowing from this very broad starting point.

What is most striking about the UNDP articulation of this concept is that it originated from policy-makers, rather than academics or analysts. Officials in the UN were seeking to capture the peace dividend that they saw emerging from the end of the Cold War and human security was quite pragmatically seen as a way of securing financial, logistical and political resources. “Right from the start”, Krause writes, “the idea of human security was a practical one with clear strategic goals” (Krause 2004, p.44).

The 1995 *Report of the world social summit for social development* clearly articulated a people-centred view of international peace and security (UN 1995, p.5). What they add to this, however, is a focus on the interrelationship between violent threats and broader development-oriented vulnerabilities: “In turn, social development and social justice cannot be attained in the absence of peace and security or in the absence of respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms” (UN 1995, p.5).

While the report includes a very wide range of harms in its discussion of prioritising social development in the UN system, it does acknowledge that some conditions may require particular attention, including chronic hunger, illicit drug problems, organised crime, corruption, armed conflicts, terrorism, incitement to racial, ethnic, religious and other hatreds and endemic, communicable and chronic diseases (UN, 1995, p.5). While the report does not label these “security threats” *per se*, it is clearly implying, as did the UNDP *Human development report* the previous year, that these threats must be considered within the framework of international peace and security (MacFarlane and Khong 2005, pp.149–150).

The 1995 report, *Our global neighbourhood* (Commission on Global Governance 1995) went a step further, by both identifying human security as an emerging conceptual framework

and by addressing the issues of sovereignty and intervention.

The Commission called for a much-expanded UN, in both scope and power. While many of its recommendations fell on deaf ears at the time, others have regularly re-emerged as necessary elements of UN reform (such as global taxation, a standing UN army, and a new Court of Criminal Justice).

In defining relevant threats, however, the report specifically identifies the concept of human security and states that the right to “a secure life” means much more than freedom from the threat of war. The Commission’s view of human security is firmly rooted in the discourse on sustainable development, and it sees the UN as the global authority responsible for protecting the global environment, and the security of individuals, to prevent conflict and war and to maintain the integrity of the planet’s life-support systems (Lamb 1996, p.6). This report is a clear endorsement of a broad conception of human security.

The 1997 *State of the world’s refugees* report uses the concept of human security to serve three purposes. It starts by making a clear effort to place the issue of internally displaced persons (IPDs) and forced displacement within the security, rather than development, discourse. By highlighting the issue as a consequence and tool of war, and linking it to the most egregious of war acts in many of the most troubling conflicts of the 1990s, the report makes a clear case for considering forced displacement as a narrow, or violence-based, human security threat.

Second, the report argues that IDPs present a particularly difficult situation in relief work, because the sovereign rights of their state take precedence over their own rights. As Sadako Ogata notes: “the international system of protection created for refugees at the end of the Second World War extended only to those who crossed borders” (Brookings Institution and Centre for Global Development, 2003) while “Historical experience has demonstrated that authoritarian and exploitative states are prone to treat their citizens as political and economic pawns” (UN High Commission for Refugees [UNCHR] 1997, p.3). Nevertheless, when the structure of the state disappears entirely, as was the case in Somalia, people are equally at risk. This theme would be taken up

explicitly in the ICISS report. The difficult balance between these two extremes – a state being both the cause and cure for insecurity – has led many to argue that the UNHCR should shift away from legal asylum and towards a human security perspective on forced displacement within, or across, borders (Adelman 2001; Schmeidl 2002).

Third, the report argues that refugee and IDP movements are often an indicator of a region or group's wider state of insecurity. People do not leave their homes and communities unless they are faced with a serious threat (UNCHR 1997, p.2).

In 1999, at the request of the Security Council, the Secretary-General submitted a report on the multi-dimensional threats to civilians caught in war. While it is not as significant as some of the reports reviewed here, The Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council *On the protection of civilians in armed conflict* does represent the first clear indication of a shift towards a narrow conceptualisation of human security in the UN system in general, but more importantly, in the Secretary-General's thinking.

The report lists quite specific recommendations on how the Security Council could address the plight of civilians, rather than nations, in war. It suggests that, in recognition of its duty to maintain peace and security, the Security Council must address the a range of threats including attacks against civilians, forced displacement, specific problems faced by children and by women, denial of humanitarian assistance and the continued use of anti-personnel landmines and the humanitarian impact of sanctions (Annan 1999, pp.2–4). In so far as it relates to the Security Council, this is a clear endorsement of the narrow, violence-based conceptualisation of human security. This shift is particularly important considering the nature of the Secretary-General's 2000 report to the Millennium Summit, *We the peoples*, that would follow the next year (Annan 2000).

At the heart of this report is the theme of people as the referent of international peace and security. It explicitly references the first article of the Charter as its mandate to urge wide-ranging UN action. In light of the human security discourse, however, the report makes a very interesting distinction between the two competing

paradigms, with chapters on freedom from want and freedom from fear.

The freedom from want chapter highlights a wide range of development-oriented harms, many of which would be included in the Millennium Development Goals later in the year. While there is a focus on the most serious broad threats, such as extreme poverty and HIV/AIDS, they are often included in the same breath as a call for those in the developing world to be granted access to digital technology, debt relief and trade access, which are not threats, but mitigating mechanisms for potentially negative conditions. Notably, the term human security is not used to describe any of the threats in the freedom from want chapter.

The concept of human security, however, is used repeatedly in the freedom from fear chapter to describe what, as in the 1999 report, is a narrow security agenda. The chapter notes the changing nature of conflict and links both its causes and consequences to a broader range of threats. Alleviating human insecurity, however, is attached solely to "the protection of communities and individuals from internal violence" (Annan 2000, p.43). Areas prioritised include preventing deadly conflict, protecting vulnerable groups, strengthening peace operations, and addressing the dilemmas of intervention. Also central to this chapter is the idea that human security is linked to conflict prevention and peace operations, not development.

The Secretary-General's 2000 report is the first main example of the concept of human security having lost its way in the UN. It propagates a misguided dichotomy between broad and narrow security (Owen 2004) even using the fear and want terminology of the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, and then goes on to attribute the concept of human security to "narrow" threats. This example of the policy consequence of conceptual ambiguity became particularly clear with the formation of the Commission on Human Security (CHS).

In 2001, as a response to UN Secretary-General's call for a world "free of want" and "free of fear". Under the leadership of Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, the CHS was asked: "to promote public understanding, engagement and support of human security and its underlying imperatives; to develop the concept of human security as an operational tool for policy

formulation and implementation; and to propose a specific programme of action to address critical and pervasive threats to human security” (Chourou 2005, p.16).

The resulting and much anticipated report, *Human security now*, provides a detailed and well-researched articulation of a conception of human security that is very much rooted in the discourse and theory of international development. However, whereas development is focused on achieving equitable growth and sustainability, the report argues that human security goes further to address the “conditions that menace survival, the continuation of daily life and the dignity of human beings” (Chourou 2005, p.19). This conceptualisation also has a strong focus on the protection of freedom, (Sen, 1999) and places significant value on personal empowerment (Brookings Institution 2003).

The CHS definition of human security is “to protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment” (UN 2003, p.4). This articulation had evolved considerably from earlier drafts (Alkire 2002) and several aspects of it require elaboration. First, the concept of the “vital core” occupies a central place. This vital core is a “set of elementary rights and freedoms people enjoy. What people consider to be “vital” – what they consider to be “of the essence of life” and “crucially important” *varies across individuals and societies*” (Ogata and Sen 2003). This focuses human security not just on the individual, but on a specific aspect of individual survival. To me this is far too broad an interpretation of what the vital core entails. Second, the definition found in the report highlights both the critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) nature of the threats that should be included under the rubric of human security.

The report goes to significant lengths to stress that human security is a complementary, rather than competing, paradigm to national security. They are symbiotic in four ways: human security’s concern is the individual and the community not the state, menaces to people’s security include threats and conditions that have not always been classified as threats to state security, the range of actors is expanded beyond the state alone, and achieving human security includes not just protecting people but empowering them to fend for themselves (CHS

2003). While this is reasonable, it remains to be seen whether this will convince the most recalcitrant of states that human security, particularly as articulated in this report, poses little threat to their sovereign power.

While one commentator has characterised the report as a document written “by idealists and for idealists,” (Brookings Institution 2003) it does contain a significant pragmatic policy prescription. Although the CHS lists 10 tasks that should be undertaken to advance human security, outside the framework of the Millennium Development Goals there is no mechanism for assessing the progress of these tasks.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of *Human security now* has been the enthusiastic endorsement it has received from several important donor nations and the action that this in turn has generated. For example, the Japanese government has all but adopted the CHS definition as its guiding framework. Amongst many other initiatives, Japan established the UN Trust Fund for Human Security with \$200 million of support for promoting human security-based development initiatives.

There has been much critique of the overly broad nature of the Commission’s definition of human security. While this will be addressed in the following section, one way to test its relevance is to look briefly at the next major UN document on international peace and security – the report of the Secretary-General’s report to the High-level Panel on threats, challenges and change: *A more secure world: our shared responsibility*.

Similar to the Commission on Global Governance and the CHS, the High-level Panel on threats, challenges and change was established, at least in part, in response to a new position taken in a major speech by the Secretary-General. This was Kofi Annan’s “Fork in the road” speech to the General Assembly in the wake of the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad (Annan 2003). Following the speech, in which he suggested the UN faced a decisive moment in its ability to provide collective security for member states, Kofi Annan asked the High-level Panel to “assess current threats to international peace and security; to evaluate how our existing policies and institutions have done in addressing those threats; and to make recommendations for strengthening the United Nations

so that it can provide collective security for all” (Annan 2004, p.4.)

As the *Human security now* report had only recently been released, and as one of its principal authors, Sodako Ogata, was also on the High-level Panel, it would have been a significant endorsement for the Panel’s report *More secure world: our shared responsibility* to use their definition. Instead of embracing the concept of human security, however, the report focuses on what it calls a “comprehensive system of collective security”. While Annan provided conceptual flexibility in his instruction to the panel, they stayed within the confines of the traditional security paradigm. In order to bring new threats, such as HIV/AIDS and global warming, into the security mandate of the UN, however, they broadened the concept of collective security but without the deepening it to the individual level. The referent of security remains the state, and security threats are therefore defined as harms that threaten its integrity. This new articulation of collective security is therefore: any event or process that leads to large-scale death or lessening of life chances and undermines states is a threat to international security (UN 2004).

Like the UNDP definition, although incorporating a much narrower range of threats, all potential threats are grouped into six clusters: economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious disease and environmental degradation, inter-state conflict, internal conflict, genocide and other large-scale atrocities, nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons, terrorism, and transnational organised crime.

Again, however, the concept of comprehensive collective security only gives these threats value insofar as they threaten the state, not the individual. Human security is not mentioned anywhere in the report. This could have been the result of a number of reasons. They could have been worried that the global South feared that the concept provided a rationale for intervention, that it was too broad and unmanageable, and that implementing it would overreach the UN’s capacity, and remove their responsibility from states.

In March 2005 following the UN High-level Panel report Kofi Annan released a report in advance of the heads of state meeting for the five-year review of the Millennium Development

Goals (Annan 2005). *In larger freedom* makes a particularly interesting case study, because it is a culmination of Annan’s evolving thinking both on what role the UN should play in the world and, more specifically, on what select aspects of the sweeping High-level Panel report he believed were achievable.

As in *We the peoples* five years earlier, *In larger freedom* divides threats to security into freedom from want and freedom from fear. However, there is little use of the term “human security”, even in the violent threat section. Instead, and in many ways remarkably, the High-level Panel report’s notion of comprehensive collective security is used. The Secretary-General states that he embraces the “broad vision that the [High-level panel] report articulates and its case for a more comprehensive concept of collective security” (Annan 2000, p.25). Further, “this concept can bridge the gap between divergent views of security and give us the guidance we need to face today’s dilemmas” (Annan 2000).

The ensuing description of comprehensive collective security has a striking resemblance to much of human security discourse. It recognises the broad nature of vulnerability, including environmental degradation and infectious disease, the inability of states to protect their citizens, that threats are fundamentally interconnected, and that in this “interconnectedness of threats we must find a new security consensus”, and that the multilateral framework must adapt to this new reality” (Annan 2000, p.26). “Dignity” is treated as a separate section. This has implications for the definitional section below. What he is describing is essentially the UNDP’s broad conceptualisation of human security.

Following the 2005 heads of state meeting for which Annan’s *In larger freedom* was written, a joint memorandum, the World Summit *Outcome document*, was signed by all attendees. This document was the subject of much controversy as the US delegations made several hundred last-minute revisions. While it is a much more general and, many would argue, watered-down, document than either *A more secure world: our shared responsibility* or *In larger freedom*, the memorandum is important because it demonstrates what the member states of the UN are willing to collectively articulate as threats to international peace and security, as well as the UN’s mandate to counter them.

Four areas are highlighted in the World Summit *Outcome document*: development, peace and collective security, human rights and the rule of law, and strengthening the UN. Notable are the separation of development from peace and security, the use but not explanation of the “comprehensive” qualifier to the concept of collective security, the inclusion of the “responsibility to protect”, and the very limited mention of human security.

The *World Summit outcome* treats development as a separate field from security, and states that “each country must take primary responsibility for its own development and that the role of national policies and development strategies cannot be overemphasised in the achievement of sustainable development” (UN 2000, p.4).

Second, the term “comprehensive collective security” is used, but the document does not mention what specific threats may fall under its purview: Member states are far more comfortable with the Security Council identifying a very limited range of threats to international peace and security, than either the Secretary-General, or the General Assembly doing so. The difficulty in broadening the list of threats to collective security, and in shifting the referent away from the state, does demonstrate the challenge facing advocates of the UN adoption of human security.

Third, after much lobbying by the Canadian delegation, the term the “Responsibility to protect” was included as the principle that should guide UN responses to genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. This places a conditionality on state sovereignty with respect to the adequate protection of their citizens and represents a tangible shift away from the state as the sole unit of international peace and security in the UN.

Finally, the concept of human security is mentioned, and it is suggested that a debate on its proper definition should be held in the General Assembly.

## Human security and the UN – three problems

Three themes emerge from the discourse on human security within the UN: the confusion between human security and development, the overlap between human security and human rights, and conceptual overstretch. Together,

these problems help to explain the reluctance of the Secretary-General and many UN member states to fully endorse the concept. If the UN is to adapt to most contemporary vulnerabilities it must be capable of operating outside the state as a unit of analysis. This means not only broadening the scope of threats that can threaten states, as suggested by the concept of comprehensive collective security, but also deepening the referent of security to groups and individuals. Consequently, for human security to be more fully streamlined into the UN system, these three areas of ambiguity must be addressed. This section will discuss these concerns, and the next will offer new ways of conceptualising human security in order to overcome these problems.

### Development and human security

The principal ambiguity found in almost all UN treatments of human security is a lack of clear differentiation between human development and human security. Both in theory and in practice, the two are often used interchangeably, resulting in significant confusion regarding the value added offered by the human security discourse.

Possibly the biggest culprit is the CHS, which takes a decisively development-oriented approach to human security. The Commissioners state so many similarities between the two that it becomes difficult to grasp the differences. The CHS report argues that, human security “fruitfully supplements the expansionist perspective of human development by directly paying attention to what are sometimes called ‘downside risks’”. The concept of downside risks, is still tied the concept to the success, or lack thereof, of international development.

The 1994 *New dimensions of human security* report separates the two by arguing that, while development is about widening choices, security means that these choices can be exercised freely and safely (UNDP 1994). The report continues by describing the links between the two, and in so doing, loses some of this clarity: “Failed or limited human development leads to a backlog of human deprivation – poverty, hunger, disease or persisting disparities between ethnic communities or between regions [that] can lead to violence” (UNDP 1994).

Another attempt at distinguishing the concepts comes from Sabine Alkire, who was one of

the principal authors of the CHS *report*. Alkire outlines four similarities and three differences between development and human security: both are people centred, multisectoral and multi-dimensional, both have long-term views on human fulfilment and both deal directly with chronic poverty (Alkire 2002). While the first two of these points seem correct, the latter two are questionable. The timeframe for human security depends very much on which conceptualisation is used (whether on short-term emergencies or on a much longer term approach), and the connection with poverty is hardly a major confluence.

However, the differences between human security and human development provided by Alkire are quite useful. The first is the strictly delimited nature of human security. Its goal is limited to providing vital capabilities to all persons equally while human development includes concerns that are not basic (Alkire 2002). Human security looks directly at the threat outcomes, such as violence or economic downturns while development looks at the engendering process. Human development is more concerned with long-term institution building, whereas human security addresses emergency relief. The focus on emergencies is tremendously important, and will be addressed below. However, the problem with all of these articulations is that they often contradict one another, depending on what conceptualisation of human security is being used. If it is a very narrow, violence-based definition, then there is little overlap between the two but if a broad definition such as that of the CHS is used, then the conceptual ambiguity is more problematic.

### **Human rights and human security**

The second problem is the relationship between human rights and human security. Because both concepts refer to the individual, their theories and mechanisms are often used interchangeably. This creates further ambiguity as to what human security is actually adding to the UN discourse. To address this challenge, it is valuable to look briefly at a series of academic distinctions between human rights and human security.

Greg Oberleitner argues that human rights provide a conceptual and normative framework

for human security. Human rights violations often cause insecurity, and human rights institutions help to prevent human insecurity. Human security brings human rights closer to the debates about security, conflict-prevention and post-conflict peace-building. Finally, human security allows for a better explanation of the consequences of human rights violations by non-state actors (Oberleitner, 2002).

Sadoko Ogata builds on this idea of human security as a means of empowering human rights, both practically and conceptually. Conceptually, human security “gives equal importance to civil and political, as well as to economic, cultural, and social rights, and thereby addresses the violations in a much more integrated and comprehensive way” (Brookings Institution 2003). Sabine Alkire makes a similar point. Human rights advocacy “is a coherent undertaking precisely because any rights violation *obliges* others to act” (Alkire 2002). Human security on the other hand, invokes a reciprocal duty, where primary responsibility for acting falls on the state, but if it is dysfunctional, then international organisations must step in, not just to pressure the state to respect human rights, but to replace the state’s duty to protect. Thus, argues Alkire, “to some extent human rights provides a more basic framework of universal obligations; human security refers quite pointedly to a certain cross-section of such obligations (Alkire 2002).

Finally, Oberleitner asks three questions regarding the relationships between human rights and human security that together provide useful guidance. First, is human security a human right itself? The answer, based on Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is an unequivocal yes. Second, he asks whether human rights should be seen as the core, or normative foundation, for human security. Human rights, he argues, are part of human security. As basic needs have been reformulated and reframed as human rights issues, then if one takes the universality of human rights seriously, issues such as food, shelter, health and education must be seen as components of both rights and security. Basic needs in this sense are a precondition to human rights (Shue 1980). I would argue, however, that basic needs are one component of human security, which is a precondition for human rights.

Third, he asks what the relation is between human security and human rights in terms of mutual enrichment as well as potential mutual dilution of the respective concepts. The answer is threefold. As human rights are the “basis for a life in dignity, well-being and security”, they “can provide a useful framework for the promotion of human security”. There is a mutually benefiting relation between the two with respect to conflict – human rights violations are often the cause of conflict and, in turn, respect for human rights can help to prevent violence; and human rights foster the harmonious relations that can only benefit individual security. While these relations between the two are useful, a better base understanding of the two concepts is needed. Without this, correlative analysis of any kind, let alone empirical, would be non-substantive.

While these academic attempts at differentiation are helpful, if the distinction between human rights and human security is not explicitly made both in the definition of human security and in its use in the UN system, then the utility of both concepts is diluted. In addition, as the concept of human rights has a far more significant legal and normative history, the responsibility lies on proponents of human security to clearly define the difference between the two – something they have yet to do convincingly.

### **Conceptual overstretch**

The third consistent problem with the use of human security in the UN system is what MacFarlane and Khong label “conceptual overstretch”. The tendency to include every possible threat to the individual in various UN conceptualisations of human security has had a negative effect. This leads to false priorities and hopes, causal confusion and securitisation and military remedies. While aspects of their critique are problematic, as I will discuss later, they do provide a useful overview of the inherent risk in any broad conceptualisation of human security. If all issues are prioritised as threats to human security label, “What is not a security issue,” MacFarlane and Khong ask, “And how does one prioritise among these dimensions?” (2003, p.237).

The second pitfall occurs when both development conditions and violent threats are

grouped together as threats to human security, so that identifying the causes of both becomes difficult. This dynamic is, of course, particularly poignant when looking at the relationship between conflict and development. Finally, by associating security so closely with military and defence infrastructures, securitisation may lead to militaristic remedies to problems best dealt with in other ways. The US use of the military to counter the problem of drug exportation in Columbia is a good example of this phenomenon. Further, as Krause and Williams (1996) argue: “Making the environment a national security issue may subvert the goal that proponents of this change seek to achieve... placing [environmental issues] on the security agenda means subverting them within the concepts and institutions of state security (that is, military responses against a particular ‘target’).

### **Organised violence versus the threshold conceptualisation**

If clearly and appropriately articulated, the concept of human security can uniquely capture the evolving nature, challenges and purpose of the post-Cold War UN system. However, the concept can remain true to its principles of shifting the referent of security to the individual in two possible ways: through the organised violence definition, and through the threshold-based conceptualisation.

#### **Human security as organised violence**

The most recent articulation of the narrow conceptualisation of human security by MacFarlane and Khong is of most relevance to this analysis. “Is there a way”, they ask, “to mitigate the pitfalls [of human security] while retaining some of the more promising features of the concept?” (UN 2003, p.244). To do this, they argue that a definition must meet two challenges. It must achieve conceptual clarity by remaining true to its reference to the individual and it must analytically delineate and justify which threats are included and which are not (UN 2003).

The vertical and horizontal movement of the referents of security is similar to what

both Rothschild and Paris see as the multi-directional extensions of security (Roland 2002, pp.87–102; Rothschild 2002, pp. 53–90). First, security can be extended vertically from the state up to the international system or down to the community, group or individual. Second, security can be extended horizontally to include a broader range of issues than simply those that threaten the integrity of the state. MacFarlane and Khong agree with the former but have concerns with the latter. Their organised violence articulation of human security, therefore, seeks to deepen security to focus on the individual, but to limit the broadening to a manageable list of threats.

The organised violence conceptualisation aims to limit the horizontal extension of legitimate human security threats to those that are physical and based on violence. This is not a new idea. However, MacFarlane and Khong build on these earlier narrow definitions by adding the source of the violence, a perpetrator. What makes violence particularly potent, they argue, is that it is organised. Targeting the perpetrator adds conceptual clarity and “analytic order” to what is potentially an unmanageable concept (UN 2003, p.246).

Using this definition, the threat to individuals has to be violent and has to come from other organised individuals. Therefore, a tsunami would not count as a threat to human security, but an Al Qaeda attack would. Also included would be genocide, internal, terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing and torture. While MacFarlane and Khong state that environmental threats and disease are important, they argue that it is a mistake to treat them as security issues. They clearly believe that these “most deadly” threats are perpetrated by leaders of organised groups.

The problem, however, is that in order to gain conceptual clarity MacFarlane and Khong are forced to somewhat arbitrarily limit threat inclusion to one source, and in so doing they shut out most preventable threats to individuals from the mandate of security studies and policy. Communicable disease alone killed over 18 million people in 2000. Omitting these deaths from the security debate is a significant deviation from the original UNDP rationale for the concept and doing so for the sake of operational efficiency comes at a real cost.

Indeed, to argue that threats to the integrity of the individual can only come in the form of violence perpetrated in an organised fashion, and that all other threats to the lives of individuals should be addressed using different conceptual and operational frameworks, provides neither conceptual nor practical clarity. The former simply leaves out a wide range of harms that do in fact threaten the integrity of the individual, and the latter simply does not count the vast range of harms people face.

The question, therefore, is: can a definition be both conceptually accurate, in that it represents all major threats to the individual, and analytically coherent? Is there an alternative to narrowing the concept so far that only physical violent threats are included as threats to the individual? There must be a way to bring the vast number of preventable deaths from non-violent causes, into the human security rubric without making the term conceptually meaningless and practically unfeasible. Such an alternative will now be discussed.

### **The human security threshold**

If the concept of human security is going to survive in the UN system it needs a definition that is both conceptually accurate and analytically coherent. If this cannot be accomplished, then the broad conceptualisation of human security will have to be abandoned and a narrow violence-based articulation, such as MacFarlane and Khong’s, adopted to salvage at least one component of the concept – the vertical shift to the individual.

To do this, I argue that the concept should be viewed as a threshold, surpassing which any threat in any location could become a security threat. Not all issues in all places would have to be addressed; only those that become severe enough to warrant the security label. What is needed is a dynamic conceptualisation that allows the space, scale and time frame of security to drive threat inclusion. Only when threat inclusion is defined by an objective assessment of what threatens individuals, rather than a subjective list (broad or narrow), will it be able to truly assist the UN system in identifying and acting against global insecurity.

First, human security must recognise that there is no difference between a death from a

flood, a communicable disease, or a war: all preventable harms could potentially become threats to human security. However, people can be harmed by a vast array of threats and varying harms require dramatically different policy responses. The definition must be selective, without limiting any harms that affect large numbers of people. This aspect of the hybrid definition is derived from the Commission on Human Security: "Human security is the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats". The advantage of this wording is that it remains true to the broad nature of human security, while separating it from more general concepts of human well-being and development. Making the referent object "all human lives" puts the focus on the individual, while also indicating a universalism in its mandate.

As the highest level of human insecurity is likely to occur in the developing world, this is particularly important. Reference to "critical" attaches urgency to the concept and "pervasive" attaches scale. Threats must therefore be urgent and large-scale. The "vital core" can mean many things, and here it includes only survival. Threats to the vital core must therefore seriously threaten lives, not just well-being.

As there are an unlimited number of possible threats, only the most serious, those that take or seriously threaten lives, are included in this definition. The definition sets the parameters, and lets the conditions on the ground determine what is and is not included. Out of an infinite list of possible threats, some will surpass a threshold and become human security concerns, while others will be dealt with through existing mechanisms. This threshold echoes the contrast with human development highlighted in the 1994 UNDP report and a similar crisis-based approach is articulated by Thakur and the United Nations University (Thakur 1997).

The second part of the definition addresses the issue of conceptual clarity – a definition must be able to separate and categorise all possible threats for meaningful analytic study. Categories are therefore established under which all human security threats are ordered. These categories are not threats themselves, but rather are conceptual groupings, providing a degree of disciplinary alignment to what is an overarching concept. Therefore, human security is the

protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive . . . environmental, economic, food, health, personal and political threats.

### **Human security thresholds and the three UN problems**

For any definition of human security to be of use to the UN system, it must be able to address the three concerns raised above. It must be able to clearly differentiate itself from the concepts of development and human rights. If this definition seeks to challenge the narrow, violence-based definition, then it must also address the three pitfalls of conceptual overstretch outlined by MacFarlane and Khong and discussed above.

First, there is a clear need in the UN system to distinguish between the development and human security. They simply cannot be conflated. Using the threshold conceptualisation the distinction between the two is the point at which a development issue crosses the threshold of severity and becomes a threat to human security. Determining this line entails a subjective decision, but in any country or region, the development concerns that fundamentally threaten the lives of large numbers of people are, for experts, relatively easy to identify. For example, in some countries in Africa, HIV/AIDS is such a large-scale and imminently destructive menace that it must be tackled with all the resources and prescience afforded to a security concern. In other countries, HIV/AIDS may not be as significant a problem and traditional development mechanisms may be more appropriate.

In short, not all development concerns should be labelled threats to human security. Under a threshold definition, issues such as education, for example, would most likely not be considered threats to human security. Certain environmental, health, economic and human rights abuses would, however, in some cases cross the threshold and become human security threats. Human security is therefore a precondition for human development, but not vice versa.

Second, human rights and human security are very different concepts. While rights signify the basic legal entitlements of individuals, security involves personal safety. Rights generally depict conditions to which all people are entitled; security addresses their very survival.

Finally, a right is a claim against someone or something. Security, on the other hand, is a condition, or state, of someone or something.

As outlined in the threshold definition, using the term “security” has certain requirements. Security carries a level of urgency that should only be used to address imminent disasters. Certainly, some human rights abuses would qualify as human security threats, but not all. Mass human rights abuses against a particular group of society are also a threat to human security. Suppression of religious freedom, while a concern, would not in most cases qualify as a human security threat.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, lists many conditions that, while certainly harmful, do not surpass the threshold of severity to be treated as security threats rather than criminal, political or legal issues (UN 1948). What is most important is the recognition that protection from the abuse of human rights is one component of ensuring human security. Individuals also need protection from poverty, disasters, conflict and disease. Put another way, protection from gross violations of human rights is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of human security.

The legal system, whether national or international, is the appropriate mechanism for addressing most human rights abuses, and international environmental organisations and treaties are the appropriate institutions to deal with most environmental problems. Some, however, surpass the threshold and become human security concerns. When they do, we must have both a monitoring system that can identify them and a security infrastructure that can effectively mitigate the threat. As Oberleitner states well, “human security is thus a broader concept, comprising fundamental rights as well as basic capabilities and absolute needs ... Human rights are part of human security” (Oberleitner 2002, p.14).

Finally, the threshold conceptualisation can also help us address the three potential pitfalls of conceptual overstretch outlined by MacFarlane and Khong and discussed above. By limiting threat inclusion by severity it avoids the potential false priorities and hopes of making all “bad things” human security issues. This threshold is, of course, to a certain degree subjective, although it can be informed by a wide

range of data. But it is worth remembering that national security threat identification is also subjective. A state decides what constitutes a threat to its integrity.

Second, regarding causal and analytic confusion, I am not convinced that the relationship between conflict and underdevelopment is either dichotomous, or necessarily sequential. Complex issues are often fundamentally interconnected. Isolating the very worst, as the threshold conceptualisation does, allows for the modelling of just those very worst conditions. This is a different exercise from simply modelling violence in all cases, regardless of threat level. It may be that there are certain underlying attributes found in all cases of human insecurity, whatever the cause, violent or not. We would not know this by only isolating violent threats as dependent variables. This simply suggests that there is value in studying multiple threats as outcomes of various models of insecurity. I see no reason why other threats should not be singled out as dependent variables. On a qualitative level, by bringing the wide range of human security issues together we are able to better facilitate the very type of interdisciplinary analysis needed in order both to understand the various threat types, and to decipher the complex relations between them. The study of violence is an important exercise; however, it is incapable, on its own, of capturing all meaningful (critical and pervasive) threats to individuals. It therefore should be treated as one of many potential causes of human insecurity – and studied as such.

Third, securitisation does not necessarily mean militarisation. It is exactly the association between security and the military that human security was first instigated to oppose. To many, the peace dividend was seen as a means of re-allocating resources to non-militaristic, but still deadly, threats. Further, by deepening human security but not broadening it, as the organised physical violence definition does, are we not simply propagating this association? While all violence is not militarised, the policy prescriptions for most violence-related threats falling under the “organised violence” definition (small arms, gang violence, landmines, etc) are generally based in the security sector. By both deepening *and* broadening the concept of security to include any threat that surpasses

the security threshold, no matter what the cause of origin, the threshold conceptualisation necessarily forces non-military, or non-traditional security sector, response mechanisms into the discourse and practice of international peace and security.

## Conclusions

The relationship between the UN and the concept of human security is a complex one. The organisation has responded to the widely felt inadequacies of the traditional security paradigm by naming and defining a fairly broad version of the concept in 1994. However, if the concept fails to take root within the welcoming environment of the UN system, what hope does it have in other venues fixated on the national security paradigm? Understanding the state and future of human security within the UN is therefore critical for proponents of the concept.

Overall, while the idea that security should be broadened to include a wider range of threats is present at all levels of the UN system, member states should still be viewed as reluctant to adopt a concept that so explicitly challenges the traditional security mandate. This is in part due to the failure of human security proponents to clearly define the concept. In particular, three principal ambiguities are of significant concern.

There has simply not been a clear enough articulation of the difference between human development and human security by proponents of human security and there has been almost no attempt in the UN system to articulate the differences between human security and human rights. Had the early UNDP and CHS reports provided a clear and workable definition, then the concept would have stood a far better chance of being used in the three major reports on the changing UN conception of security to follow. The third problem is the conceptual overstretch of the term leading to the three potential pitfalls discussed by MacFarlane and Khong.

In addressing address these concerns, MacFarlane and Khong have proposed the adoption of a narrow, violence-based definition. While pragmatically they may be correct, they deviate too far from the core principle for human security – to match the theory and practice of

security to the realities of contemporary vulnerability.

A compromise can potentially be found in a threshold-based conceptualisation of human security. This definition limits the threat inclusion of threats by their severity rather than their cause. Only the worst threats in any region, whatever their cause, are prioritised with the label of security. All others remain within their constituent disciplines and institutional structures. The conditions that are seen as crossing the threshold of human insecurity, whereby they become something qualitatively different – an emergency requiring the prescience and resources attributed to the security label. This may or may not affect the response mechanisms used to address the security threat – which could range from development tools, to humanitarian relief, to Security Council-authorized interventions.

This articulation recognises that human security is a precondition for human development, but not vice versa. People must first be secure from critical and pervasive threats to their vital core, whatever the cause, before the mechanisms of development can take root. The two are not synonymous. Second, using the threshold definition, the protection from gross abuses to human rights – those that cross the threshold – should be seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for human security. Human rights abuses are only one category of potential human security threats. As with environmental and health issues, most human rights abuses should be dealt with outside the security mandate but in some locations, come simply must be prioritised with the security label. Third, a threshold approach deals with conceptual overstretch by not allowing all threats in all places under every potential category of security to be prioritised. While there are infinite possible harms that could threaten an individual, there are only so many that critically and pervasively threaten the vital core of large numbers of people.

The UN is in the ideal position to promote and instigate the threshold conceptualisation of human security. As nearly all major reports since 1992 have recognised, the UN system must adapt to the evolving nature of insecurity. The balance of power between states is incapable of ensuring international peace and security, and in the Security Council's Chapter VII, power, even if broadened to include "comprehensive collec-

tive security”, still refers solely to threats to the state. Despite this limitation the UN remains uniquely suited to tackling human insecurity. However, to do so, phenomena that may not threaten the integrity of the state, but that do kill large numbers of people, must be considered within the security mandate that the UN was established to protect.

Some argue that a universal definition is not necessary and that human security can in fact thrive on its ambiguity, interpreted in different ways for various purposes in various contexts. Human security, like sustainable and human development, would be understood via the successes and failures of its varying advocates. I am sceptical of this *laissez-faire* approach. The very purpose of human security is to re-evaluate current security theory and policy and to rally the world’s thinkers, leaders and resources to the

issues actually affecting people, rather than to those the military establishment deems important. Advocates of the narrow conceptualisation are aware of this reality and think we should cut our losses and focus on one harm: organised violence. This will, however, do little to protect the millions who will die from non-violent, yet preventable, human security threats.

The conception and apparatus of security should not be used to address each and every possible threat to the individual. It should, however, be capable of protecting people from the most serious harms they face. Until we can ensure that people are safe not just from inter-state war and nuclear proliferation, but also from preventable disease, starvation, civil conflict and terrorism, then we have failed in the primary objective of security – to protect.