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Viewpoint: True Measures of Human Security

by Paz Buttedahl

Throughout today's world, traditional measures for protecting national security are failing to prevent tragic violations of the most basic aspects of human security. Territorial sovereignty and military capacity become scarcely relevant when human security concerns such as ethnicity, religion, the environment, governance, the economy and human rights turn into flashpoints for violent conflict.

The failure of models based on the national security perspective points to the urgent need for a new model based squarely on human security. Such a model would permit the UN and national governments to act quickly on early warning signals. Rather than permit the levels of atrocities we have witnessed in places such as Bosnia and Rwanda, a human security framework could alert appropriate actors to uproot the seeds of conflict well before they take hold.

A preoccupation with state-centred security has long been at the heart of foreign policies both in developed and developing countries, and, consequently, has had high priority in policy formulation. It devours great quantities of scarce financial and human resources through spending on armed forces personnel, military hardware and weapons systems. Such misallocations affect the capacity of developing countries to invest resources in addressing human security problems. Paradoxically, then, excessive spending on conventional security measures can indirectly worsen the human security situation, thereby contributing to potential conflicts.

Recent efforts by the world donor community to move to some degree from a state-centred perspective to focus more on indicators of human development is a step toward enhancing the importance of human security. Publications such as the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Program reflect a desire in the international arena to reconsider the traditional indicators of security needs. As demonstrated in Central America, Eastern Europe, and Somalia the roots of potential conflict can too often be traced back to problems of poverty, inequity and social oppression of one kind or another.

HUMAN-CENTRED DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY

One could argue that the notion of human security has always been implicit in the concept of development. However, the failure to achieve longstanding development goals along with increases in societal conflict in various forms demonstrate that the complex interplay of developmental and security factors has not been fully understood.

What precisely does human security mean? One answer is found in an examination of IDRC-supported research related to societal interdependence and the mutual vulnerability of the North and the South. It concluded that human security implies, as a minimum, a number of interwoven dimensions centred on human dignity¹:

personal and physical security: the right of individuals and communities to preserve their own life and health and to dwell in a safe and sustainable environment.

- economic security: access to employment and to the resources necessary to maintain one's existence, with adequate measures taken to reduce maldistribution and artificial scarcity and to permit improvements in the material quality of community life.
- social security: providing protection from discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity or social status, combined with access to safety nets, knowledge and information as well as freedom to associate.
- political security: guaranteeing the right to representation, autonomy (freedom), participation and dissent, combined with empowerment to make choices and a reasonable probability of effecting change. This political dimension includes legal-judicial security: individual and collective access to justice and protection from abuse.
- ethnic and cultural security: a social climate in which minority populations feel secure in expressing their cultural identity.

RISK ANALYSIS

A focus on human security requires preventive measures to anticipate conflict and, in the event of conflict, limit its escalation. To this end, a framework for risk analysis should be incorporated into the design of development policies and projects.

In the state-centred approach, the value of risk analysis lies in the ability to fully understand the context in which conflict might arise, and the factors that will perpetuate conflict.

A similar grid could be applied to analyze security risks from a human-centred perspective. Thus the context in which conflict may arise, and the factors that sustain it, will relate to threats to human dignity such as a lack of food, water, shelter, education, autonomy, or protection from abuse. The ultimate goal would not be the use of force to deter such threats. But understanding them could point to policies and programs capable of preventing social deterioration and the escalation of conflict. Force then becomes a last resort when all other preventive efforts have failed.

A critical issue in a human-security centred approach lies in the ability to read accurately the indicators of a deteriorating social fabric. Clearly, such an ability is vital to uncovering warning signs that might not be visible at first glance. As Prof. Jorge Nef of the University of Guelph states: The key issue of real economic development is not the size of the GNP or the GDP per capita, nor the rate of growth of such indicators, but the essential growth of impoverishment in real terms.² Consider the following examples of such impoverishment:

- one-half to two-thirds of Africans live in a state of permanent and deep poverty.
- During the 1980s, the average per capita income fell by about three percent per year in Sub-Saharan Africa and by about 1.3 percent in the highly indebted countries of Latin America. The cumulative figures of economic decline for the 1980s indicate 25 percent for Africans and 10 percent for Latin Americans.

A better ability to read and interpret such socioeconomic indicators will significantly improve the possibility of anticipating and managing conflict before it escalates beyond control.

In the end, it is a sense of urgency and readiness for action by those actors required to intervene in situations of conflict that determines the success of any form of security analysis. A sense of urgency must also be cultivated as an essential component of the human-centred approach. This readiness for action could help reach the goal of developing preventive measures for conflict resolution, as advocated by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali in his Agenda for Peace. The moral imperative used to justify a nation's decision to resort to force is the preservation of state stability in other words maintaining the rule of law. In the case of human security, the moral imperative for action is the preservation of human dignity

in all its dimensions. If these dimensions of human security took greater priority in the risk analyses of national and international actors, it could at the same time go some way toward meeting crucial objectives of both sustainable development and global security.

Notes

1 Head, I.L. 1991. On a hinge of history: The mutual vulnerability of South and North. University of Toronto Press, Toronto. 244 pp.

2 Nef, J. 1993. Address to National Defence College, Kingston, March.

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