

Obstacles to human security

Analysis of the 2004 Social Watch national reports

From the Social Watch national reports it emerges clearly that in industrialised or developed countries the main obstacle to human security is linked to the economic dimension. The main problems are recession, weak growth, economic crises, and deterioration in the quality and conditions of people's lives. The outstanding obstacles are the lack of equitable parameters in the distribution of social benefits and the provision of access to basic services for all sectors of society. These reports offer a vision of human security which will enable all human beings to live in dignity.

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Security has been the subject of a heated debate all over the world, a debate about policies that would make the world and the societies in it more secure, a debate about the factors causing uncertainty, fear and insecurity among people and within States. This debate is complex and involves a wide range of antagonistic opinions. It is an expression of the world's great diversity and a reflection of the varying opinions and positions held by different countries and their policy-making apparatus. In this ongoing and unavoidable global re-assessment of security the concept of *human security* can help shift the focus of the debate in the direction of what humanity really wants rather than what a few States and their specialised security bodies are interested in or perceive.

The concept of human security has different dimensions, and the statistics in the 2004 Social Watch Report are organised around them.

Origins and definition of human security

The concept of human security appeared in the context of research for peace in the 1980s as a counterpoint to the concept of "national security" predominant during the Cold War. It came into widespread use internationally in 1994 when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) built its *Human Development Report*¹ around it. UNDP maintains that the core of human insecurity is vulnerability and that we must ask ourselves how people can be protected, insisting on their direct involvement and on the close linkage between development and security.

As a starting point, UNDP identified the following eight dimensions of human security (and therefore, human insecurity): economic, financial, food, sanitary, environmental, personal, gender, community and political.

A few years later, governments in countries such as Japan, Norway and Canada adopted the collection of ideas underlying this concept in the design of their foreign policies. They also adopted a list of specific subjects including the prohibition

of anti-personnel mines, the control of light arms, the prevention of recruitment of child soldiers, the promotion of International Humanitarian Law, support for new human rights bodies set up by the United Nations, assistance for refugees and participation in peacekeeping operations.

The concept of human security, then, is evolving, and the discussion that it generates is an excellent opportunity to redefine the old security schemes based on military force and to identify the needs of the planet as a whole in all its diversity, aspects which have hardly been considered in general public policies.

According to the Commission on Human Security, human security "means protecting vital freedoms. It means protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations, building on their strengths and aspirations. It means creating [political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural] systems that give people the building blocks of survival, dignity and livelihood."²

Human security is complementary to the notion of territorial security of the State in that it is more concerned with the individual and the community than with the State itself. It is therefore possible to differentiate clearly between "national security" policies which focus on the State's territorial integrity and the freedom to determine its form of government, and "human security" which emphasises people and communities, and in particular civilians who are in situations of extreme vulnerability, whether owing to war or social and economic marginalisation. Dangers to people's security include threats and situations which, from the point of view of state security, are not always classified as threatening. Moreover, the human security focus widens the range of actors involved in such a way that the State is not the exclusive actor. The aim of human security is not only to protect people but to empower them so that they can fend for themselves.

Leading academics like Economics Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen have been calling for years for the adoption of this new human security perspective as an instrument for re-thinking the future and for re-assessing the concept of development itself, which is not only related to the

growth in per capita income but also with expanding people's freedom and dignity. Sen advocates re-defining the old international institutions that were set up in the 1940s and drawing up an agenda of the changes that are most needed. Among others, he includes trade agreements, patents laws, global health initiatives, universal education, dissemination of technology, environmental policies, foreign debt, conflict management, disarmament, etc. An agenda, in short, that will make human security viable.

The objectives of human security also agree with the Programme of Action on a Culture of Peace and the Millennium Declaration adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Although the idea of human security and the early work in this sphere originated in predominantly Western circles and governments, from the very start the debate acquired an international dimension and has included all the different shades of opinion and divergent positions which characterise the political and cultural diversity of the world. The academic and political debate is centred on whether human security should focus on first generation political rights or whether it should also include second and third generation rights, including the rights to development and to food.

Human security is inclusive and people-centred. It emerges from civil society in an attempt to protect individuals and their communities. It goes beyond issues of territorial defence and military power. And it is based on the notion of personal security, on the understanding that not only the State but also non-State actors and human beings are responsible for development and must become involved in promoting policies and actions that will strengthen people's security and development.

Human security is multi-dimensional. It seeks to define the political, economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions which affect people's security, and identify traditional and non-traditional threats to security based on the fact that security is not unidimensional but encompasses many spheres.

Human security emphasises association and joint effort, that is to say, multi-lateralism and co-operation. The current international context and the results of globalisation have changed the scale of the problems which were formerly seen from an exclusively national perspective. We are now faced

1 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). *New dimensions of Human Security*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

2 Human Security Commission. "Final Report" at www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/

with a new international order in which the capacity to interact is essential if States are to recover their ability to work with other actors and generate a system able to meet people's demands at national, regional and international levels.

Human security and human development

In Kofi Annan's view human security "...in its broadest sense, embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care and ensuring that each individual has opportunities and choices to fulfil his or her potential. Every step in this direction is also a step towards reducing poverty, achieving economic growth and preventing conflict. Freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment - these are the interrelated building blocks of human - and therefore national - security."³

The paradigm of human development links human security to equity, sustainability, growth and participation, since it allows an assessment of the degree of life security attained by people in society, as well as interpreting the possibilities and challenges that society may encounter in its progress toward full and sustainable human development.

From the perspective of human security, what matters in terms of security is not so much that States and societies should be concerned with guaranteeing peace from external threat, but rather that they should guarantee the minimum conditions for people to be secure and to feel secure in their societies.

Two basic dimensions

There are two basic dimensions to human security. The first is to protect people against chronic threats like hunger, disease and repression; the second is to protect them against sudden and damaging changes in their daily lives, whether it is in the home, in employment or in the community. These threats can have a negative impact on people at all income levels and stages of development in a country.

Human security complements State security, promotes human development and enhances human rights. It is complementary to State security in that it focuses on people and on fighting causes of insecurity which were formerly not considered as specific threats to State security. By contemplating these new types of additional risks it extends the scope of human development beyond the notion of "growth with equity."

What lies at the core of protecting human security is respect for human rights. The promotion of democratic principles is a step toward achiev-

ing human security and development in that it permits people to participate in governance structures, thus allowing their voices to be heard. In order to achieve this it is necessary to set up stable institutions which establish the rule of law and empower people.

Human security is only possible when it is based on sustained development. This presupposes security at different levels for all members of society - security from physical danger and threats, income security, security in education, housing security, health security and environmental security.

Threats and obstacles to human security as viewed from the national reports

The Social Watch national reports offer a series of arguments and evidence about the problems and difficulties which put at risk the security of people in different countries.

The possible threats or obstacles can be grouped into seven main dimensions: economic, food, health, personal, community, cultural (including the gender dimension) and political, all of which appear in the different national reports. In country after country it is poverty, economic exclusion, social inequality and food insecurity that stand out as the biggest and most common obstacles to human security.

While this article does not attempt to make a regional analysis in the strict sense of the word, it is possible to identify different problems in different regions of the world or the different ways countries are positioned in the international context.

Thus, it emerges clearly that in industrialised or developed countries the main obstacle to human security is linked to the economic dimension. The main problems mentioned are recession, weak growth, economic crises, and deterioration in the quality and conditions of people's lives. The outstanding obstacles in these countries are the lack of equitable parameters in the distribution of social benefits and the provision of access to basic services for all sectors of society.

On this point, the reports from Portugal, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany are very illuminating. The Portuguese report cites the deterioration in people's conditions of life due to the economic crisis and a growing feeling of personal insecurity. Switzerland reports on the poor economic growth since the beginning of the 1990s, and the impact of tax reductions that are making it increasingly difficult to implement social improvements, which means that social inequality in Switzerland will continue to grow. The report from the Netherlands deals with the way economic problems are affecting social security, and to what extent they also affect tolerance and hospitality toward immigrants. The report from Germany also mentions these problems and dwells on the obstacles to human security that stem from fiscal problems and the reduction in expenditure on social welfare.

Poverty and economic inequity

An issue which recurs again and again in the reports from developing countries is poverty and the resulting deterioration in the living conditions of millions of people. There is no doubt that poverty stands out as one of the biggest obstacles to human security.

The seriousness of this problem appears eloquently in the reports from Algeria, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Panama and Uganda, to mention only a few.

Poverty is closely linked to other obstacles. The Algerian report lists the main threats to human security as "widespread and increasing poverty, frequent terrorist attacks and natural disasters". In Kenya, poverty and organised crime are the biggest obstacles. Again, in Panama poverty affects 40% of the population, so the biggest challenge to human security is the fight to contain it, particularly in rural areas, and to ensure that the population receives the minimum services it requires. The report from Colombia explains that it will not be possible to guarantee full human security while war, poverty and inequality continue to worsen.

Conditions that go hand in hand with poverty, like unemployment and economic inequity are also cited in reports from countries such as Bolivia and El Salvador.

These are situations of economic insecurity framed in the context of generalised extreme poverty. Two key elements in the fight toward eradicating poverty are the setting up of markets that operate adequately, and the creation of institutions outside the market. A number of the reports suggest that the essential issues are a fair distribution of wealth and economic growth which will benefit people living in extreme poverty.

Besides chronic poverty, other obstacles to human security are unfavourable economic conditions, the social impact of economic crises, and natural disasters. Social policies which meet people's basic needs and guarantee minimum economic and social conditions are required if the people affected by the crises are to have real security or some way of escaping from poverty. Three quarters of the world population do not have social security protection or do not have a guaranteed job.

Another aspect is the different obstacles that are rooted in gender. It is vitally important that everyone should have access to land tenure and/or ownership, access to credit, education and housing, particularly in the case of poor women.

The equitable distribution of resources is perceived as crucial for guaranteeing the means of life. Moreover, social protection measures and security networks can contribute to establishing minimum social and economic conditions for the most vulnerable sectors of the population.

3 Kofi Annan. "Secretary-General Salutes International Workshop on Human Security in Mongolia." Two-Day Session in Ulaanbaatar. 8-10 May 2000. Press Release SG/SM/7382. www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2000/20000508.sgs7382.doc.html

Health security

Another subject which stands out in the reports is health security, that is, health as an element in human security. In spite of the progress made in health care, more than 20 million people died in the past year from diseases that could have been prevented. Health is an essential component because the very foundation of security is the protection of human life, and good health is a precondition for social stability.

Three big health problems are identified as closely linked to human security: infectious diseases, health threats related to poverty, and the dangers to health resulting from violence, conflicts and war.

The most serious problems in this area are infantile mortality and HIV/AIDS. There is a close relation between child mortality and poverty, since the direct causes of the latter are malnutrition, lack of drinking water and adequate sanitation, infections, poor food and lack of medical attention. A further vulnerable point is the increase in the numbers of HIV/AIDS victims, particularly evident in sub-Saharan Africa and Brazil.

Governance problems, political insecurity and corruption

As well as the economic and sanitary dimensions to human security there are other threats which have to do with people's security in the political and social spheres. These include the weakness of democratic governance and the instability of political systems. These dimensions of vulnerability lead to violence in a number of countries such as Colombia, Nepal, Nigeria and Uganda.

Governments across the world have developed national security plans in the framework of the global fight against terrorism, but this has not contributed to alleviate the political insecurity prevailing in many countries. The national reports emphasise the need for democratic conditions, good governance and political security as pre-requisites for human security.

In many countries human security is jeopardised by corruption, discrimination based on race, sex, ethnic origin, religion or political orientation, as well as political insecurity and the absence of democratic possibilities.

Different forms of violence

Another group of obstacles to human security mentioned in the reports, principally those from Africa and Latin America, are those connected to different kinds of violence such as urban violence, murder, organised crime, armed conflicts and terrorist attacks.

Criminal networks are clearly on the rise, causing urban violence to increase, particularly in Latin America. The country that stands out is Brazil, where one of the main obstacles to human security is urban violence in general, especially urban violence aimed at poor young people. The murder rate is nearly ten times higher in this population sector than for the country as a whole.

There is a greater awareness that among the different kinds of violence reported, it is women and

children who are the main victims. According to the reports, gender-related violence is on the increase.

The social inequalities of gender

Finally, special attention should be paid to the problems of gender. In general, the overall panorama of human security for women is bleak, expressed by non-recognition of the specific rights of women, particularly with respect to work and reproductive health rights, and violence against women in various different spheres.

Although the question of gender is addressed in the reports from a number of developed countries, it is the developing countries that show particular concern and interest in providing options and opportunities for those who have never had them - education for girls, protection for women against domestic violence and violence in the workplace, and access for all women to real political and economic power. The emphasis placed on the dimensions affecting gender equity is determined by the reality in each different country.

Three obstacles

To sum up, the three most serious obstacles to human security are, firstly, threats to the security of individuals and their communities, in particular to the most vulnerable sectors of society; secondly, conflicts, threats and different kinds of violence (inter-State conflicts, breakdown of States, human rights violations, terrorism, organised crime, etc.); and thirdly, poverty and economic exclusion.

The national reports offer a vision of human security which will enable all human beings to live in conditions of justice, equity, freedom, tolerance, good health, and to have access to adequate food, education and a healthy environment. In other words, the conditions that allow us to live in dignity. ■