

Women's agency in the midst of crises

When macroeconomic policy is viewed together with its microeconomic effects a broader picture of the economy emerges. In this way the linkages between them become clear - linkages that should be borne in mind in the pursuit of "growth with equity" and "downturn with security." The emphasis on "human freedoms and human fulfilment" under the umbrella of human security ensures that, whether in times of growth or crisis, women's agency is recognised, preserved and strengthened.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

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Waves of crises

The final decade of the 20th century taught us how painful financial crises can be. We saw crises hit Mexico in 1995, East Asia in 1997, and Brazil and Russia in 1998. The crises continued with Argentina and Turkey in 2001. The waves of crises crashed down ever more frequently, with higher peaks and deeper troughs. The waves were never confined to their place of origin but lashed shores halfway around the world.

Various multilateral groupings and agencies have sought to understand the causes of crises in order to formulate preventive measures and mitigate their effects if they cannot be anticipated. Most of the responses have been directed at the nationally-determined macroeconomic policies of the countries where the crises originated. For example, there were debates on whether currency boards were superior to floating exchange rate systems. Responses have also been directed at regulation, supervision, and related institutional structures of the respective countries, such as changes in the standards on capital adequacy and disclosure rules applied to banks.

Less attention, however, has been paid to those who have suffered the consequences of these crises. The banking system, identified as a victim of the primary effects, was cushioned by financial bailouts that were meant to prevent the aggravation of the crisis. The poor have been relegated to the status of victims of the secondary effects, as if it were necessary to emphasise their already vulnerable position in society. At best, some countries have the barest of publicly provided social insurance that is supplemented by social assistance or welfare programmes to help the poor. But the norm is more likely the absence of social safety nets that the Asian financial crisis of 1997 served to highlight. Not much has been done since then to improve these mechanisms.

Human security, as a broad concept, helps us focus on the unprotected victims of crises. The main difference between human security and the traditional notion of state security is that the unit of analysis is the people, both individuals and groups, rather than the State and its apparatus. Thus, security goes beyond military incursions and state defence to include economic shocks and social protection.

Human security from economic crises

The United Nations Commission on Human Security (CHS) claims that the objective of human security is "to protect the vital core of all human lives... from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations" and the approach uses "ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment".¹ How can this objective be met in the context of economic and financial crises? When do economic and financial crises constitute critical and pervasive threats?

Although the measurement of the impact of financial crises on the indicators of survival, livelihood and dignity cannot be perfectly established, it is quite obvious that such effects are devastating when these crises occur in a context of extreme poverty. Poverty implies a vulnerability to crises, whether small or large. It would be more useful to identify the specific expressions of tragedy in the localities experiencing crises so that appropriate actions of redress could be undertaken.

Financial crises are pervasive threats that repeat themselves over time. At the national level, financial crises may appear rarely; but taken together at the global level, the threats must be addressed internationally. These threats penetrate the layers of social relations that constitute the body around the vital core of human life, which is defined as "a set of elementary rights and freedoms people enjoy."² Four levels are easily identified: the household level, the local or community level, the national level and the international or global level. The various levels determine the different contexts, conditions and trends that will give the impact of the crises their local character. Moreover, each person will have their own conception of what is vital to them. Therefore the impact of crises will always have unique features requiring very specific response mechanisms.

Governments have the responsibility for creating response mechanisms. Financial crises fall into the domain of macroeconomic policy, particularly monetary policy. Even the regulation of financial markets is still at the level of the macroeconomy. A human security perspective, however, will insist that macroeconomic policy and financial regulatory frameworks are able to demonstrate the extent to which these measures effectively protect the vital core of human lives. This

is a perspective that will force finance ministers and central banks to account for monetary and fiscal policies - either as threats to or protection for people's survival, livelihoods and dignity. This approach expands the indicators of success beyond growth and gross national income per capita, which are the usual macroeconomic indicators.

Response mechanisms are not the exclusive purview of governments. They also express active agency through informal or formal groups and civil society organisations. During crises, households and communities actively seek ways to alleviate declines in their standard of living. As the CHS has said, "[g]rass-roots efforts to build people's resilience through community-based savings schemes, credit facilities and insurance systems are important to enable people to survive low-intensity crises."³ But the financial crises of the last decade were of such tragic depth that these survival systems have been threatened and disrupted.

The protests from civil society that followed the eruptions of crises cannot be seen as disruptive activities. The human security perspective salutes such activities in that these protest actions are a form of communication that lets governments and policymakers know that things have gone wrong. This is particularly important in the case of financial markets and the formal banking system since these institutions continue to be closed to people living in poverty, and therefore, are unlikely to be responsive to their interests. Yet the volatility of financial markets has an immediate impact on the poor because the relative prices of markets that are important to the poor are compromised in any case. Thus, finance ministers and central banks must also learn to open their doors to civil society organisations for active engagement rather than dismiss them as contributors to political instability. If human security was a central tenet in finance ministers' meetings, these gatherings would not be surrounded by barricades and the barriers to communication would be brought down.

In the absence of the considerations outlined above, poverty and deprivation will remain the natural outcome of financial and economic crises.

Social policy integrated with macroeconomic policy

Human security is not just another term for social protection, although social protection is a large

1 Commission on Human Security. *Human Security Now*. New York: Commission on Human Security, 2003, p. 4.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

component of it. The CHS reports that “[t]he search for responses to new and persistent problems prompted reform of welfare systems in developed countries, a revised social agenda following the collapse of state provision of social services in countries in transition, and a new interest in social ‘safety nets’ and social protection in developing countries suffering economic setbacks engendered by financial volatility (as in East Asia), undergoing fundamental structural change (as in Latin America and elsewhere), or experiencing long periods of stagnation and even economic regress (as in Africa and elsewhere).”⁴ In order for these reforms on social protection to be effective, the human security approach must emphasise the empowerment of those who need protection the most. Thus governments’ obligation to provide social protection will be based on informed engagements and negotiations with the poor. This obligation to protect goes hand in hand with people’s empowerment. Social protection does not then become a paternalistic responsibility of governments but a collective responsibility among all social groups.

An important lesson from the East Asian crises is that a comprehensive system of social protection is needed for two reasons. Not only does it protect people from the negative impact of the shocks against economic growth but it also assists those who were unable to benefit from growth. In order to achieve both, macroeconomic policy must be formulated in such a way that it does not sacrifice the objectives of social policy. In other words, from a human security perspective, the growth objectives of financial policy and macroeconomic policy cannot take precedence over social policy objectives in such a way that “human freedoms and human fulfilment” are sacrificed.

The integration of social policy with macroeconomic policy usually finds a link in employment. However the nature of employment today is no longer limited to the narrow confines of the factory and the shop floor. The labour force is more heterogeneous than ever - workers in the informal sector, home-based workers, contractual workers, and migrant workers, among others. These workers are not normally included in social security systems connected with formal sector work. It is necessary to continue the reforms of social protection systems that are being undertaken both in developed and developing countries so that the increased heterogeneity of the workforce is seriously considered. These systems must be strengthened and their coverage expanded.

Women’s agency, not default social protection

There is one type of worker that is not usually considered under the heading of social protection. Yet these workers play a crucial but undervalued role in the economy. Housewives, mothers and other

unpaid providers of care have been assigned the task to care for the needs of dependents – the children, the elderly, the sick and the disabled. But the able-bodied worker is also a dependent of these care providers since the able-bodied worker requires cooked food, clean clothes, fresh water, fire on the hearth, emotional support and the like in order to function productively. Normally, unpaid care providers are considered economically dependent on the paid able-bodied workers but the other side of the coin is that the paid able-bodied workers are socially dependent on their care providers.

When there is a breakdown in publicly provided social protection due to financial crises and private services markets become more expensive, the system of care that has been socially determined as belonging to women is relied upon for support. Women are the default providers of social protection.

Among the expressions of women’s adjustment to the absence or deterioration of social protection, there is a decline in the quality of women’s use of time. When they lose outside support, women increase the number of hours worked in order to perform caring functions. This phenomenon has been called increasing time intensity of work. In these situations, women do multiple tasks within the same block of time.⁵ Home-based workers, for example, undertake productive activities while watching over children. The presence of social protection would have ensured that childcare was available and that the home-based worker would have engaged in productive activities in a proper work environment.

Since human security requires an actively engaged public, women’s voices need to be heard during deliberations over the structure and content of social protection. The double burden of market and non-market work with the added feature of time intensity precludes women from engaging in public dialogue and debate. Women’s mobility is further curtailed by poor and expensive transportation and by fear of bodily harm.

The biggest benefit from the human security approach is that an integrated view of social policy and macroeconomic policy should relieve women of the double work burden. These unpaid caregivers should not be deprived of pursuing their own fulfilment. By working to increase the well-being of those who receive their care, they may be sacrificing their own well-being. This sacrifice is what human security hopes to avoid particularly during times of crisis and recession.

A human security perspective brings to light the role of women in bearing the downside risks of financial crises. Human security calls on all social actors to work together to spread the burden of care so that caregivers are not exploited and deprived of their capabilities.

Conclusion

When macroeconomic policy is viewed together with its microeconomic effects a broader picture of the economy emerges. We are thus reminded of the linkages between them, which we must continually bear in mind as we pursue “growth with equity” and “downturn with security”.⁶

Moreover, collective action is called for: among women and men, among organised groups be they states, communities, or civil society organisations in order to chart a development programme that places “human freedoms and human fulfilment” at the centre of the agenda.

The emphasis on “human freedoms and human fulfilment” under the umbrella of human security ensures that whether in times of growth or crisis women’s agency is recognised, preserved and strengthened. ■

5 Floro, Maria Sagrario. “Economic restructuring, gender and the allocation of time”. *World Development* Vol 23, No 11, 1995, pp. 1-25.

6 “Downturn with security” is an expression used by Prof Amartya Sen in his lectures on Human Security.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 85.