



Towards a human security vision of global climate action

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Abstract:

This commentary piece considers how smart climate action and effective climate resilience can be productively advanced via a securitization discourse that recalls the earlier emphases of the UN's 'human security' concept from the mid-1990s. Drawing upon examples of successful climate action initiatives in the Global South, the paper argues for a discourse of integrated development that is holistically conceived, reflective of locally-attuned environmental knowledge, and underpinned by a human security vision involving overlapping UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Keywords: human security; climate action; locally-attuned environmental knowledge

“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: 2).

Introduction

A generation ago, the UN declared ‘human security’ as the central goal of a ‘people-centred’ development for the twenty-first century. A new focus of security goals would “redefine humanity’s development agenda” by prioritising “the compulsions of human security” in a post-Cold War world (UNDP, 1994: iii). The September 2001 attacks in the US resulted in a reinstatement of a traditionally understood ‘military security’ as the primary interventionary grand strategy on the world stage, and curtailed much of the UN’s efforts to advance a human security agenda. The failures of the ensuing US and Western military-led interventions in

Afghanistan and Iraq returned us once again, however, to the need to rethink global security via a more locally-attuned and interconnected sensibility. Arguably the most critical global security challenge facing us today is climate resilience. This paper reflects on how advancing smart climate action can productively involve a prioritisation of a securitization discourse that recalls the earlier emphases of the UN's 'human security' concept (UNDP, 1993, 1994). Drawing upon examples of successful climate action initiatives in the Global South, I argue for the import of a discourse of integrated development that is holistically conceived, reflective of locally-attuned environmental knowledge, and underpinned by a human security vision involving overlapping UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Human security and climate resilience

The UNDP's 1994 Human Development Report (HDR) was a landmark document. In the post-Cold War era, it sought to redefine security on the world stage by framing and prioritising an interconnected, global sense of *human* security – “relevant to people everywhere, in rich nations and in poor”, and involving a focus on pan-state insecurities configured centrally around people (UNDP, 1994: 3, 4). The 1994 HDR outlined seven component elements of human security – economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political – and underlined “two main aspects”:

[Human security] means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs or in communities (UNDP, 1994: 23).

In the UN's subsequent extended statement on human security in 2003, *Human Security Now*, Amartya Sen and his co-writers at the UN's Commission on Human Security set out “how we can enhance people's capabilities to act on their own behalf” through empowerment strategies

initiated by “states, international agencies, NGOs and the private sector” to “enable people to develop their resilience to difficult conditions” (Commission on Human Security, 2003: 10).¹ Echoing much of the discourse on climate resilience in recent years, human security for the commission was ultimately about envisioning and supporting integrated socio-environmental systems that “together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity” (Commission on Human Security, 2003: 4).

A significant challenge in advancing a human security agenda lies in how its seven elements have been sometimes differentially taken up, with some given precedence more than others in an artificially compartmentalized manner (Paris, 2001; Chandler, 2008; Christie, 2010). Policy concentration on separate aspects reflects to some degree “established bureaucratic and disciplinary convenience”, as Gasper and Gómez (2015: 100) note, but as they make clear, a more holistically orientated human security perspective can advance two critical sensibilities in responding to human insecurity, which have a particular relevance to environmental precarity: (1) “the perception of an intensively interconnected global system which we share”; and (2) “the ability to think sensitively about how other people live their lives” (2015: 112). For Gasper and Gómez (2015: 106), human security is ultimately about “promoting people’s security” through a “holistic consideration of their lives”, and certainly responding to climate insecurities in both holistic and context-sensitive ways is vital. In effect, human security sets out to avoid ‘in-silo’ securitization by insisting upon a contextually informed and interconnected understanding of security.

¹ In the UNDP’s first envisioning of human security in its Human Development Report from 1993, it called for a new resourcing of “people-centred development, not soldiers in uniform” (UNDP, 1993: 3). The Commission on Human Security subsequently redefined security in three principal ways: (1) it reaffirmed the conceptual departure from traditional, state-centred and military-framed definitions of security to one more people-centred and locally-attuned; (2) it underscored the compound threats that cut across societies and thus require multiple security and development concerns being addressed collectively; and (3) it advocated for an integrated and cooperative approach to human security in both a national and pan-national context (Commission on Human Security, 2003; see also UN Trust Fund for Human Security, 2009). The human security paradigm places particular emphasis on legally-binding human rights law, which behoves governments across the world to think cooperatively about a more collective sense of security (Estrada-Tanck, 2016).

The concept of human security is not without its limitations and has been critiqued in important ways. Some commentators have pointed to the policy incoherencies of the original UNDP vision (Liotta, 2004; Uvin, 2004); while others have asked if it is just another (neo)liberal agenda to impose and extend a Western global order (Acharya, 2001; Duffield, 2007). Notwithstanding, human security has contributed hugely to the broadening of how governmental and NGO intervention is understood and how it needs to be resourced (Altman et al., 2012; Mason and Zeitoun, 2013); and the concept has intriguing potential to further solidify operational shifts in thinking about security (Commission on Human Security, 2003; Goucha and Crowley, 2008; Martin and Owen, 2014). Additionally, feminist and postcolonial work on human security has illuminated the enduring gender and knowledge production inequalities that need to be operationally addressed (Truong et al., 2006; Tripp et al., 2013; Morrissey, 2019).

Lorraine Elliott has been a leading figure in critical security studies in arguing for a human security approach to a range of global challenges, from migration to climate change. She has repeatedly called for the governmentalities of interventionary strategies to be informed by local vulnerabilities:

To enhance human security, social resilience strategies and institutions need to be inclusive and transparent. They need to be engaged with, aware of and responsive to the vulnerabilities and security needs of local communities (Elliott, 2015: 21).

For Elliott, attending to and integrating the local is fundamental to achieving a human security endgame; and this, as Breslin and Christou (2015: 3) observe, requires a necessary “diversion of resources and instruments of global governance”. The type of security achieved is ultimately about what we choose to invest in, in terms of interventionary instruments and towards what outcome. In the discursive battle for what is the interventionary target and security culmination,

rendering visible the most precarious of human geographies is key. It then becomes a question of resourcing and enabling designated supportive mechanisms. To this end, it is especially important to learn from the Global South, where human security initiatives have been far more supported and advanced over the last 25 years, however imperfectly. Mathew Davies, Lorraine Elliott, and others have documented, for instance, the regional cooperation efforts of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in dealing with a range of development, security and human rights concerns through a human security lens (Elliot, 2012; Caballero-Anthony, 2015; Davies, 2018).²

Learning from the Global South: knowledge, scale and voice

Climate change is a global threat to human security that brings into sharp relief environmental precarity. Addressing this threat involves a core ‘knowledge production’ and ‘knowledge consumption’ challenge, which requires a concerted discursive strategy to communicate a diverse array of “epistemic geographies of climate change” from across the Global North and Global South (Mahony and Hulme, 2016: 1; see also Hulme, 2018). The securitization of climate change tends to revolve around a dominant register of political and economic uncertainty at a scale beyond the local, as a multiplier effect on macro-level systems (Mason and Zeitoun, 2013; Elliott, 2015). Given the primacy of climate insecurities being principally understood in terms of macro-level risk, the UN’s focus on both local vulnerabilities and interconnected responses, in its adoption of seventeen new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015, promised much (UN, 2015). One of the critical departures from the UN’s previous Millennium Development Goals is how achievement of the SDGs is to be measured, namely *collectively*. Signalling the import of thinking holistically about

² All have underlined the various deficiencies of ASEAN’s human security agenda too – deficiencies deriving primarily from not incorporating the most vulnerable and marginalised of voices.

development and its resourcing, and endeavouring to facilitate solutions to socio-environmental challenges in an integrated manner, the aim of the SDGs echoes the UN's vision of human security from a generation ago.³

In both the UN's 1994 invocation of human security and current SDGs, a key discursive touchstone is for future interventions and governmentalities not to perpetuate dependency or be unsustainable in their lasting effects (UNDP, 1994; Commission on Human Security, 2003; Chambers, 2008; UN, 2015). This places a particular premium on how we listen to, facilitate and activate voices and knowledge practices from the Global South, which remains a core postcolonial challenge. In the context of climate resilience strategies, there is much to learn from South-South cooperation, in particular – especially from the successes of scaling upwards and outwards locally-attuned practices of human securitization.

At NUI Galway, I am currently working with a colleague from Microbiology on developing a project in Lusaka, Zambia, where the focus is on advancing three SDGs: Clean Water and Sanitation; Sustainable Cities and Communities; and Climate Action. With a vision for connecting safe sanitation with smart climate action in supporting resilient and healthy communities, the overarching aim is to facilitate climate action initiatives that also target sustainable ecopreneurial employment opportunities in a functioning 'circular bioeconomy' (Carus and Dammer, 2018). The project hopes to showcase how specific environmental knowledges can be productively activated and scaled as part of a broader holistic approach to human security in the Global South.

Other examples of successful Global South human security initiatives focused on climate action can be found in countries such as Cuba. The achievements of Cuba's Risk Reduction

³ The European Commission has issued several subsequent declarations in support of integrated approaches to sustainable development: where "interconnections" and potential "transformations" of "economic, social and environmental dimensions" are measured holistically from a "trans-disciplinary perspective" (European Commission, 2016: 4). Interdisciplinary research has long been a strength of human security studies (Peou, 2014).

Management Centres (RRMCs) in planning for the most extreme weather insecurities, and their programmatic extension across the Caribbean in recent years, highlights the value of social solidarity, a people-centred approach to disaster preparedness and historical, locally-attuned experience in developing climate resilience (Smith, 2007). The RRMC model is an instructive example of South-South cooperation that attests to the crucial importance of situated knowledge practices for human securitization agendas (UNDP, 2016; Jerez Columbié and Morrissey, 2019). It can be drawn upon to foster more constructive responses to climate change in the Global North (Isayama and Ono, 2015); and, to that end, it is vital to showcase evidenced strategies of local adaptation and regional and global solidarity in coalescing an informed global knowledge repository to effectively face climate change.

Conclusion

Much of the current focus on climate change as a multiplier effect on global security divulges an impoverished security thinking and strategy. Risk is typically defined, measured and anticipated at a macro level, to the occlusion of human insecurities at the margins. The focus on macro-level ‘risk’ is instructive, as it legitimates strategies supposedly for the ‘common good’ but frequently rendering invisible the most vulnerable (Nixon, 2013). As I have argued elsewhere, context is often purposely missing in security grand strategy (Morrissey, 2018), and therefore a fundamental discursive challenge is to insist upon situated human geography in convincingly and repeatedly telling a story of interconnected, local-level ‘vulnerability’, instead of conceding to hegemonic narratives of disconnected, macro-level ‘risk’.⁴ If we wish

⁴ Macro-level, statist understandings of security are mirrored in the prevailing instrumental and technocratic research calls on security supported by so many funding agencies across the world. Faced with this monopolisation of how security is defined and what its concerns are, there is a vital need to support research that brings together scholars, policy makers, activists and communities in creatively considering how to respond productively to climate change and its human insecurities.

to advance smart climate action and resilience on a global stage, we can learn much from the emphases of human security first set out by the UNDP a generation ago.

Using the term ‘human security’ not only challenges macro-level and state-centred understandings of climate security, it also mobilises a political vocabulary with the potential to successfully articulate more progressive, people-centred strategies of climate resilience. In 1993, the UN recognised that the “concept of security must change”, and that “human security” needed to be at the centre of efforts to build a more sustainable future for all (UNDP, 1993: 2). It is a concept that can aid us in activating a vision of future climate security that is locally attuned and globally conceived.

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