Of Food Aid and Altruism – The Human Security Paradigm in Theory and Practice

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After the end of the Cold War and the decline of the politics of bipolarity followed a brief period of optimism, which gave birth to a brand new security paradigm: human security. While criticism of traditional security approaches became increasingly popular, the new paradigm constituted an alternative outlook that chose the wellbeing of people, rather than states, as its referent object. Fifteen years after its first official promulgation, however, the human security paradigm requires analysis and evaluation, particularly in respect to its implications for the politics of international food aid. This critical study suggests that while the emergence of the human security paradigm has triggered an important shift in the discourse of international policy making, its theoretical and practical value is limited. While terminological vagueness weakens the theoretical logic, the concept has enabled political players to effectively advertise for, and mask their motivations behind, certain forms of international policy making, particularly the provision of food aid. Through the rhetorical emphasis of human security, actors continue to succeed to advance their own political and economic agendas through food aid, absent political repercussions. I will set the stage by defining human security and by providing a critical analysis of its theoretical value. I will then elaborate on the nature of current policies of food aid and assess whether or not human security has succeeded in practice, in the post-Cold War world. Finally, I will evaluate the importance of the human security paradigm for international food aid, and explain why its qualities as political advertisement are more significant than its practical application and theoretical applicability.

Human security was first defined and promulgated in the Human Development Report of 1994, published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Instead of emphasizing military protection of the state unit from external threats, the concept holds that creating security for ordinary people through sustainable human development is the missing link to the prevention of future wars.[1] In the broadest sense, the Report defines human security as the 'freedom from fear' and the 'freedom from want'.[2] In other words, human security signifies people's ability to "exercise [their] choices safely and freely … and [describes a condition where] they can be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today are not totally lost tomorrow."[3] The document identifies seven core aspects of human security – economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security.[4] According to the Report, the new paradigm aspires to eliminate threats to these aspects of civilian livelihood through proactive, rather than defensive means.[5] However, since its first promulgation and the creation of this definition of human security, the concept has become the subject of heated debate and interpretations of its desired application vary.

Since the publication of the Human Development Report, human security has evolved into two branches, by virtue of its selective endorsement by political institutions. While the UNDP approach stresses the "interrelatedness of different types of security" and suggests international development as the most significant means by which to eliminate human security threats, several states adopted human security with a different focal point.[6] The Canadian government has successfully assembled a group of governments that subscribe to a narrower definition of human security, outlined in the Human Security Report of 2005.[7] This Report defines human security in terms of political violence that derives from fear of violent crime and frequently unfounded concerns about terrorism.[8] While this

approach adopts the individual as its referent object, it leans toward the argument of the 'responsibility to protect' as a means to achieve civilian security; thus it focuses on the 'freedom from fear' side of the UNDP defi-nition.[9] In this way, the new concept of human security has been assessed differently by political actors and its esteemed aspects selected for potential policy making. Left are two publicly supported views of human security: an inclusive stance based on human development on the one hand and a narrow stance emphasizing the necessity of political intervention on the other.

Since its emergence, human security has gained much presence in international political discourse. A variety of state governments, multilateral bodies, and NGOs have adopted human security as a preferred policy formula in their rhetoric. In 2008, for example, Barak Obama stated that the United States have "a significant stake in ensuring that those who live in fear and want today can live with dignity and opportunity tomorrow."[10] Multilateral institutions like the United Nation Institute for Disarmament Research (UNDIR) have also adopted the human security approach and led a number of activities related to the issues of freedom from want and fear.[11] Policy plans were also influenced by the paradigm. For example, while "[t]he promotion of international and regional stability through good governance and the reinforcement and reform of public institutions" was prioritized over the protection of civilians during the UN mission in Tahiti from 1993 to 1996, in a similar mission to Tahiti from 2003 to 2005 "the preservation of human rights, civilian safety and wellbeing, and integrated approaches to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR)" were emphasized in UN rhetoric.[12] As one author points out, in 2005, the term 'human security' retained more than 492,000 google.com references – almost ten times the number of 'cooperative security' references and one hundred times the number of those for 'societal security'.[13] Today the number of human security references amounts to 136,000,000, almost forty times the number of 'cooperative security' references.[14] Clearly, the human security discourse is on the rise.

However, although the paradigm has been subject to discussion in the international sphere, its theoretical value for the field of security studies is limited for several reasons. Firstly, a major theoretical flaw of human security lies in the elusiveness of the concept's very definition. Although the UNDP Human Development Report of 1994 outlines different aspects of the concept, it employs the term of human security in a strongly expansionist fashion, "encompassing everything from physical security to psychological well-being."[15] This vagueness makes a study of the concept difficult, if not impossible. Paradoxically it is exactly this imprecision that allows for the paradigm's international popularity – the more aspects of security it includes, the more political actors can rally behind its argument. In this way, the theoretical flaw of human security enables middle powers and non-state actors to partake in the human security campaign.[16] However, since the UNDP ranks all aspects of human security as equally important, treating all factors as a whole, the concept does not offer a clear guide to policy making.[17] Thus, although the vague and expansionist definition of human security presented by the UNDP's 1994 Report guarantees the concept's popularity, this very vagueness limits its theoretical value for policy makers and as a theoretical framework.

Further, the elusiveness of the UNDP definition also implies an inherent paradox that further limits the logic of the human security argument. The UNDP approach suggests that "human security is a universal concern [that describes] threats that are common to all people."[18] However, as one author notes, this universality of human security is problematic, because it implies the elimination of the conceptual difference between internal and external security threats, which, in turn, eliminates distinctions between the internal and the external in general and causes the necessity to analyse the world population as a political and social unit.[19] In other words, since the human security paradigm does not imply any form of social hierarchy and considers all individuals of equal worth, it presumes the absence of social fractions. Conversely, the author asserts, this view of the world is inherently unrealistic since any form of social organisation necessarily recreates ideas of in-groups and out-groups and thus shifts the emphasis back to the collective, for example the state, rather than the individual, as is the purpose of the UNDP approach.[20] In this way, the concept of human security, when thought to the end, paradoxically arrives back at its beginnings. By default, the group re-emerges as the referent object of security studies. This fundamental contradiction in the definition of human security further impedes on its value as a framework of analysis in security studies as well as in the creation of security policy.

Finally, even the narrower view of human security advocated in the Human Security Report 2005 appears problematic, precisely because it accepts the individual as its referent object. Particularly in respect to the question of

'responsibility to protect' this creates contradictions, because it eliminates the social hierarchy of human worth. Since, according to the human security paradigm, all lives are of equally valuable, who will save who in a situation of violent crisis?[21] Should a soldier have to risk his or her livelihood to protect civilians from political violence? Arguably, successful protection of civilians by soldiers can only take place if the life of the soldier is placed at a lower value than that of the civilian.[22] Human security, however, implies the complete abandonment of societal differentiation. Paradoxically, since the protection of individuals from political violence through soldiers is no longer enforceable, "[a] complete liberal interpretation of human security would boil down to nineteenth century anarchism."[23] This branch of the human security paradigm is thus contradictory and fails as a theoretical framework of analysis for scholars and policy makers alike.

To fully assess the practical value of a human security paradigm in global politics, a study of examples is required. The analysis of how human security has transformed international food aid policies offers some insight. Food aid is a form of assistance that includes "the international sourcing of concessional resources in the form of or for the provision of food."[24] In other words, food aid always takes place across national borders and is distributed in large amounts by an authority, usually a state, a multilateral body, or a non-governmental organisation (NGO), either in the form of foodstuffs purchased from the national producers of the donor country or in the form of money that will enable the purchase of food "in surplus regions of the recipient country for distribution elsewhere."[25] Importantly, the definition connotes an impact on the recipient country's financial balance by virtue of international provisions of food resources.[26] There is thus a clear distinction between food aid and other forms of aid such as domestic food programmes or, similarly, international trade – while the former do not constitute interstate programmes, the latter does not involve a donation of food.[27] While it is important to note that donor authorities such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) have used different, occasionally conflicting definitions of food aid and its sur- and subcategories,[28] this definition suffices for an assessment of the impact of the human security paradigm on past and current food aid policies.

The influence of political interests of and public and private lobby groups has historically flawed, and continues to flaw, the policies of food aid. The concept as it is known today came into existence with the United States' enactment of Public Law 480 (PL 480) in 1954. In accordance with the major motivations listed in this law, throughout the Cold War, the United States, Canada, and later the European Union, used food aid as a foreign policy instrument "to develop export markets, to contain communism, … to reward loyal allies," next to combating hunger.[29] Consequently, in 1970, the top ten food aid recipients by gross volume included India, Pakistan, South Korea, and Vietnam.[30] Economically, self-interested food aid frequently intensified economic and political hardship in recipient countries. While donation programmes provided a solution for the costly storage of growing domestic surpluses in post-war North America and later in Europe, recipient need was exacerbated through donor state subsidies for domestic farming, which sharply decreased the market price of foodstuffs and subsequently damaged the economies of states already predisposed to economic plight.[31] Evidently, food aid during the Cold War was defined by state-centred ideas of security.

However, although human security has gained increasing presence in international discourse, these flaws persist until today. Although food aid has somewhat declined due to the absence of the scramble for allies that was triggered by bipolarity, food aid remains a tool to force policy reform onto critical states and of political and economic self-interest.[32] The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food for Progress (FFPr) Program, for example, which is largely responsible for the U.S. food aid, emphasizes the donation of food "to developing countries and emerging democracies to support democracy and an expansion of private enterprise."[33] The involvement of interest groups also persists. The United States Maritime Administration under the Department of Transportation (DOT) "reimburses USDA and [the Agency for International Development (USAID)] for a portion of the shipping costs incurred under the cargo preference requirements that restrict 75 percent of US food aid shipments to US-flag carriers."[34] While this boosts the national profitability of food aid, it inevitably politicises the donating action.[35] Through the visibility of the U.S. flag, the state can gain a charged political presence in the recipient state. Further, as studies suggest, "almost all donors give preference to countries that are geographically close to the donor or to the US or Western Europe in case of WFP and NGO aid."[36] This may not directly prove donors' political self-interest in the matter.[37] However, if human security is not the objective of these policies – if it were, they would be directed first and foremost toward the worst crisis areas – state security through domination or regional alliance is what logically

follows. Evidently, even with the emergence of a human security paradigm, donors continue to neglect the individual as a referent object, frequently in the name of political or economic self-interest.

Likely the most drastic example of the ineffectiveness of the human security paradigm in actual policy is the international response to the North Korean Famine in the late 1990s. By holding back desperately needed emergency food aid, the international community, and particularly the United States, attempted to pressure the government in Pyongyang into the reform of its nuclear programme and the resumption of peace negotiations with the South.[38] Further, while "North Korea, which takes self-reliance as its guiding ideology, … sought to limit any direct contact in taking grain from the South, … Seoul want[ed] to maximize exchanges and to make sure its aid [was] clearly labeled as South Korean."[39] Obviously, while the deliberate display of altruism was meant to convince the public of South Korea's moral legitimacy, this action constituted an attempt to damage the legitimacy of the North Korean government and was seen as a danger to dominant ideology. Evidently, the donors were more concerned with eliminating North Korea as a rogue state than with the provision of food to its starving people. Meanwhile, however, the positive connotation of emergency food aid covered up the political implications of international food aid policies by virtue of the moral logic of giving food to the needy.[40] In this way, not only was the human security paradigm abandoned in favour of political blackmail, it also served to mask the real motivations of intervention.

Moreover, while the rhetorical emphasis of human security does represent the main motivation for food aid, the new paradigm may in some cases even strengthen traditional security approaches. As one author points out, "[p]olitical persuasion through emergency aid is attractive because those who would … oppose helping starving people are few in the donor countries."[41] In other words, politically motivated food aid, used to create security for the donor state, can be practiced without political repercussions. When considering the policies of states, multilateral organisations, or NGOs, the paradigm offers a considerable degree of immunisation against donors' political disrepute by virtue of their flawed food aid measures. Further, what, if not a human security paradigm, would strengthen sentiments of moral obligation to donate? As the human security approach grows ever more present in the discourse of international politics, the notion of feeding the hungry becomes a most effective tool to advertise for provisions of food aid, whereas situations of need can be determined and rhetorically blown up by a donor, according to political interest. In the case of North Korea, while the international community knowingly created food aid conditions that the Pyongyang government could impossibly accept, donor countries were able to pressure the administration while showing themselves as the 'good guys' that were trying to help, but were refused by the 'ruthless dictatorship'. In this way, the argument of human security can function as an aid to advertise for, and mask the often political motivations behind international food aid. In reality, however, the paradigm does not replace politics of state-security.

The human security paradigm has grown at great speed, since its first promulgation in the Human Development Report of 1994. However, this study suggests that while the emergence of this concept has changed international policy discourse in favour of 'freedom from want' and 'freedom from fear', the theoretical and practical value of the paradigm appears limited. In theory, the approach is flawed by its vagueness and contradictions. In practice, political rhetoric has not translated into action. While human security is treated as the referent object in food aid rhetoric, evidence suggests that the main motivations continue to be of political and economic nature. While the human security paradigm dominates the rhetoric, state security often remains the motor of international food aid policies. Finally, as during the North Korean famine of the late 1990s, the human security paradigm allows donors to advertise for, disguise the true motivations of, and thus legitimize their policies. While the human security paradigm appeals to the masses by virtue of its moral legitimacy, it does not sufficiently contribute to the alleviation of human suffering around the world.

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[21] Ibid., 238.

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