Human Security in the Age of Ebola: Towards People-centered Global Governance

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The Ebola outbreak that began in March 2014 continues to ravage the West African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone and has claimed over 4,500 lives thus far. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) have both called the Ebola outbreak one of international concern because of its risk to the human security of individuals in the region and the need for a global response. I argue that while the UNSC's actions are a watershed moment that put human security on the international agenda, we lack the appropriate global governance mechanisms to make people-centered security a reality. The next step is to link back the idea of a people-centered human security to people through appropriate global governance mechanisms that enhance accountability to beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. I suggest that a *transnational ethical community* organized around the ethical obligation to provide human security while maintaining accountability to beneficiaries, might improve coordination and commitment to human security objectives.

Human Security

On September 18, 2014 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2177 stating "the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to *international peace and security*." Previously, the UNSC called HIV/AIDs a "risk to stability and security," but focused on its regional effects in Africa. Resolution 2177 is the first time that the UNSC has labeled a public health crisis a threat to *international* peace and security. This is a watershed moment because it refines shared understandings of what constitutes a security threat in the international system and how the world should respond.

Traditionally in international relations, security implies the protection of national borders, populations, and territories from militarized threats. Thus, we conceive of security as national security: it is state-centered with the main objective being the protection of the state from real or perceived external security threats.

By contrast, human security is people-centered and emphasizes common values rather than national interest. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) defines human security as "safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression" and "protection from sudden and hurtful disruption in the patterns of daily life" (UNDP 1994). The Commission on Human Security (CHS) adds that "human security is the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats."

In defining human security, the UNDP identified seven dimensions—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. This broad and inclusive list of the sources of human security focuses on the potential causes of harm to individuals (Owen 2004, Paris 2001). More targeted definitions of human security focus on the severity and urgency of a human security threat in addition to its source (Owen 2004, Thomas and Tow 2002).

What distinguishes human security from traditional security paradigms is that the severe and urgent threat to individuals might originate from a non-military source. A global intervention is required when a human security threat is pervasive—impacting several areas of human security simultaneously—and when state-level capacities are

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insufficient.

Human security is premised on a common core of progressive values: human rights, international humanitarian law, and socio-economic development based on equity (Suhrke 1999, Thomas and Tow 2002). CHS' emphasis on protecting "all human lives" recalls the universalism of the principle of humanity that undergirds humanitarian action. The principle of humanity requires humanitarian organizations "to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being." Thus, in a shift from state-centered security paradigms, the security threat highlighted by the UNSC is a threat to people and their right to life with dignity.

The Ebola outbreak constitutes a human security crisis because it poses a severe and imminent danger to human life; is pervasive in that it affects multiple dimensions of human security; and state-level capacities are inadequate. President Obama recognized these key features of a human security threat when urging the UNSC for a commitment "to stop a disease that could kill hundreds of thousands, inflict horrific suffering, destabilize economies, and move rapidly across borders." The countries most severely affected by the outbreak—Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia—are recovering from long periods of conflict and instability and lack adequate resources to combat the crisis. This underlying vulnerability not only hampers their ability to effectively prevent, contain or stop the outbreak, but has also spilled over into other areas of human security. The World Food Program predicts that an escalation in the Ebola crisis could trigger a major food crisis. It is already distributing food aid to alleviate food insecurity resulting from disruptions in regional aid, travel bans, quarantines, and deaths of farm laborers. Likewise, the World Bank warns of the economic impact of the crisis, which has slowed growth, damaged key industries such as mining, agricultural and services, and resulted in rising prices of staple goods.

The Progress, Setbacks and Promise of Human Security

Using the language of human security is important for two reasons: first, it creates the ethical obligation to protect individuals from real or perceived threats and then places that obligation squarely in the realm of collective responsibility. There has been consistent progress on human security in the global arena (Oberleitner 2005). In 2004, the UN launched the Human Security Unit, which manages the UN Trust Fund for Human Security and supports the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in their discussions of human security issues. UNGA resolution 66/290 (2012) describes the human security approach as one that links peace, development and human rights and articulates shared understandings to guide its practice.

The language of human security is also increasingly pervasive in foreign policy. For instance, the United States government launched its Global Health Security Agenda in July 2014, a multi-party effort organized with other countries, international organizations, and private actors. Its mandate is to "accelerate progress toward a world safe and secure from infectious disease threats and to promote global health security as an international security priority." Importantly, the U.S. Government acknowledges "Global health security is a shared responsibility that cannot be achieved by a single actor or sector of government." The Global Health Security agenda shows how the discourse of human security with its emphasis on global security threats and the collective responsibility to address those threats has permeated U.S. foreign policy and enabled articulation of new and pressing foreign policy objectives.

Despite the progress on human security, there remain real limitations to policy implementation. Modifying traditional thinking on security to include human security requires the development of innovative global instruments that articulate the collective responsibility to provide human security and increase collaboration and commitment across all sectors of international activity (Oberleitner 2005). We lack adequate transnational instruments for addressing human security problems that arise from an increasingly complex, globalized security environment as is quite evident in the current Ebola crisis (Thomas and Tow 2002).

One reason for this is that health governance is still largely state-centric, bureaucratic and grounded in international law. Bureaucracies are organized around rules, routines and standard operating procedures. Standardization generates predictable responses, which makes bureaucracies effective, but rules and routines can also slow them down (Barnett and Finnemore 2004). For example, the WHO must adhere to the scientific procedures prescribed by the International Health Regulations—a legal framework that obliges states to report certain infectious diseases to

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the WHO—to declare a public health emergency of international concern. In April, Doctors Without Borders, warned of the unprecedented nature of the crisis, but WHO, following IHR protocol, downplayed concerns in part because it received only sporadic data on the number of cases. Subsequently, the WHO did not declare the outbreak an emergency until August. Thus, paradoxically, the standard operating procedures and legal framework meant to guide the WHO also constrained its ability to act quickly in face of a public health crisis.

Another reason why current international mechanisms are insufficient is that they do not circle back to people affected by human security threats. The UN and WHO are comprised of member states whose elected representatives are accountable to their national constituencies. Traditionally, we think of political accountability as the processes and practices through which elected officials report on and answer for their performance to their constituents. To truly develop global instruments for human security the global community needs to expand the meaning of accountability to reflect the transnational interactions that transcend and breech state boundaries. People-centered human security needs people-centered accountability. Humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been working hard since the 1990s to develop workable standards and principles for accountability to beneficiaries as a means of improving the quality of humanitarian aid. Learning from their experiences could provide valuable insights into how to shape global governance of human security.

Accountability for Global Human Security

The delayed response by the WHO and the UN in the current outbreak, suggests that a more informal organizational form like a transnational community organized around the collective responsibility for human security outcomes would provide more flexibility and rapidity in addressing human security crises.[1] A global community anchored in the core common values of human security and committed to social accountability to affected populations would improve human security outcomes. Social accountability, as opposed to political accountability described above, captures multi-faceted accountability relationships where global actors identify the broader social and cultural expectations, rules, norms and values that govern their social relationships and create their social obligations (Fry 1995). While a conventional understanding of global governance suggests that organizational forms that emphasize social over legal obligations might not work because they are neither state-centered nor grounded in international law, progress on accountability in humanitarian action suggests otherwise.

My research on transnational NGO accountability institutions in the humanitarian sector provides insights into the constitution of what I call transnational ethical communities in global governance (Deloffre 2014). Transnational ethical communities (TECs) emerge around a collective goal to advance social justice and equity. TECs include states, international organizations, NGOs, multi-national corporations, official aid agencies, private foundations, and those individuals and communities affected by the TEC's core activity. In debating the meaning of the collective goal, members generate mutual social obligations, shared practices and ethical responsibilities that coordinate their activities. My research shows that TECs shape the global governance and coordination of humanitarian action through informal, voluntary, consensus-based self-regulation—such as the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership-International, the Sphere Project, and the Joint Standards Initiative.

And while it might seem far-fetched to think that states would commit to social accountability, there is precedent to think that it is possible. These NGO initiatives have influenced how official state agencies think about and practice humanitarian aid. In 2003, donors, including states, founded the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, an informal donor network created to enable principled donor behavior through GHD principles and practices.

Conclusion

Successfully addressing future public health crises requires development of a global community organized around the ethical obligation to provide human security while maintaining accountability to beneficiaries. A global human security community would create real assurances that community members would respond to future human security crises like the Ebola outbreak. Most importantly, adopting a rights-based approach[2] that links the rights of individuals to the collective responsibility to provide human security could facilitate consensus around the meaning and practice of human security (Deloffre 2014).

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Notes

[1] Vabulas & Snidal (2013) make a similar claim for informal inter-governmental organizations.

[2] The rights-based approach obligates actors to design programs, policies and procedures in a way that furthers the realization of human rights as described in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and other international legal instruments.

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Maryam Zarnegar Deloffre is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Arcadia University. Her current book project investigates how humanitarian NGOs develop common standards and mechanisms for defining, monitoring, and regulating their accountability in the global sphere.