

HUMAN SECURITY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK INDISPENSABLE FOR ANALYSING THE RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *COVID-19 pandemic affected millions of people worldwide and challenged the ability of national and international institutions to help suffering people and prevent others from being infected. From a theoretical point of view, this pandemic was framed as a human security crisis by officials of the United Nations, politicians, and researchers because it had a severe impact on human lives as a result of posing a threat to their health. The centrality of human beings for the concept of human security allowed the COVID-19 pandemic to be connected to human security and thus to be subjected to the process of securitization. A further aspect that significantly contributed to establishing this correlation was the fact that pandemic had been included in the concept of human security since it gained prominence back in 1994, becoming one of its characteristic constituents. Understanding how COVID-19 pandemic had been associated with human security and what made possible for them to be related contributes to explaining the present relevancy of human security, helps clarifying the theoretical basis of its application to this pandemic, facilitates the framing of potential future pandemics as a threat to human security and improves the use of this theoretical outlook in relation with pandemics.*

Keywords: *human security; United Nations; pandemics; COVID-19; securitization; health security; pandemic security.*

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic was described as a threat to human security and the broad international effort to counter it was regarded as being designed to provide worldwide human security. This paper documents the connection established between human security and COVID-19 pandemic at both political and scientific level and explains why it was possible to establish a link between them. Thus, the first section considers how the COVID-19 pandemic and human security have been related at the UN level and in the discourse of politicians, as well as in scientific works. The second section analyses the link between human security and pandemics as it appears in relevant UN documents and initiatives from the period preceding the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and as it is reflected in scientific literature published before 2020.

1. The human security-COVID-19 pandemic nexus in United Nations, political and academic settings

COVID-19 pandemic was connected with human security as a threat to it and various solutions put forward at international level to counter that plague have been elaborated as a human security response so that it is possible to understand the pandemic as a problem essentially pertaining to human security. Thus, António Guterres, the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, attended at the height of the crisis, in June 2021, a meeting organized by the Group of Friends of Human Security, and he stated therein that the initiatives of international community aiming at ending the pandemic perfectly fit the human security concept, therefore representing a form of implementing it (Guterres 2021). Guterres grounded his assessment primarily on the fact that people were put at the forefront of the international endeavour to stop the crisis, a feature that characterises the human security approach.

A month before, the UN High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, Izumi Nakamitsu, in a speech delivered for the debate platform Friends of Europe Transatlantic Security Jam, pointed out that, for solving the COVID-19 crisis then confronting the world, it was necessary to adhere to a human security vision of world problems which enabled one to depart from increasing the military spending to allocating the financial resources required for investing in better health conditions for people (Nakamitsu 2020).

The same year, the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security launched a regional programme designed to support in the Eastern Caribbean the use of human security as an approach to formulating responses to COVID-19 pandemic (The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2021); such a framing of these responses was considered possible because it meant that humans were central for the whole regional undertaking, an aspect which defines the human security outlook.

The South Korean president Moon Jae-in, in an address from May 2020, emphasised that classical security concept, because it covers only military aspects, was inadequate for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemics within a security framework, a shortcoming that made necessary for the concept of human security to be employed (Moon 2020).

Soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020, the former president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, wrote for TIME an article where he argued that the nature of that phenomenon required a global cooperation conducted under the heading of human security, a concept which, unlike the traditional concept of security that covers only military aspects, is adequate for considering the pandemic as a security threat (Gorbachev 2020).

From all these statements follows that human security was a concept that had to be employed with respect to COVID-19 pandemic because its scope covered the threats to human beings to which this infectious disease belongs. Without making recourse to this concept, the COVID-19 pandemic could not be turned into a security problem, that is it could not be subjected to the securitization process because the traditional concept of security does not include such threats.

Moving now to the scientific field, it is to be mentioned that United Nations Development Programme released in 2022 a special report dedicated to human security in which argued that COVID-19 pandemic is illustrative for the peculiarities acquired by health threats in contemporary world where such crisis will become more frequent (United Nations Development Programme 2022, 3, 119). It is equally relevant that Toda Takao, in an article that appeared at the end of 2020, explicitly characterised the COVID-19 pandemic as a threat to human security (Takao n.d.) and that in a study, published just two months after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, with financial support from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and elaborated by experts from the Centre for International Studies based in Rome, that pandemic was described as a threat to human security that goes beyond the health component to affect all the other components of human security, namely economic security, food security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security (Caparini 2021), a characterization which indicates that COVID-19 was conceived as a fundamental and all encompassing threat to that security.

In April 2020, Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, a scholar from United States Institute of Peace, published an analysis where he called the attention on the fact that overcoming COVID-19 requires an extensive reliance on the concept of human security, more exactly that adequate solutions for the pandemic must be devised from within that concept and therefore had to prioritize people (Trenkov-Wermuth 2020).

It is to be observed that a common denominator of these views from the scientific field is the idea that COVID-19 endangered human security precisely because such an

understanding of security was centred on humans and the fact that only the human security tools are suited for tackling the pandemic.

The interplay between COVID-19 pandemic and human security have also been a topic for scientific conferences, including in developing countries, an example being *Impacts, Consequences and Responses to Covid-19 in Bangladesh. A Human Security Approach*, an event that took place on June 2020 and was organized by three institutions from Bangladesh: North South University, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance, and Center for Peace Studies. According to the brochure published in preparation for the mentioned conference, human security was the adequate theoretical background for discussing the pandemic because it dealt with wide ranging threats to human life (North South University 2020); it is to be remarked that one issue considered by participants was the preference of authorities from developing countries for traditional security at the expense of human security, a situation having a negative impact on the ability of these states to effectively handle the pandemic.

2. Pandemic as a threat traditionally associated with human security

The connections between human security and COVID-19 pandemic had been established not only because this plague affected people`s lives and because human security is concerned with the wellbeing of humans, but equally because infectious diseases and, particularly pandemics, had been always treated as a threat to human security. This means that, when COVID-19 pandemic erupted, the theoretical background for framing it as a threat to human security was already in place so that all that was needed was to apply it to that particular situation. To prove this idea, an examination of documents relevant for the United Nations and of selected scientific literature will be conducted beginning with the former ones.

The *Human Development Report 1994* elaborated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) pointed out that human security included health security and that the latter refers to epidemics caused by infectious diseases, including respiratory infections, that in some cases spread across the whole world; it was mentioned that developing countries were more exposed than the developed ones to such health threats given that people living in developing countries suffered from malnutrition and had access to poor health care systems or lived in areas where they were altogether lacking (United Nations Development Programme 1994, 27-28).

It is to be remarked that, albeit pandemics fall within the scope of what the UNDP termed as global threats to human security, namely threats originating in one country that „spill beyond national frontiers”, and thus could be logically included in global human security, UNDP did not mention them within this category (United Nations Development Programme 1994, 34). Therefore, one could rightly argue that it is in line with the definition of global human security advanced by UNDP to consider that there is a global health security for which pandemics represent a threat and, consequently, that enlarging its concept of global human security to include pandemics is justified. This extension is permitted by the 1994 report of the UNDP because the enumeration of threats to this type of human security is not an exhaustive one.

A further document that played a key role in the trajectory of human security within the United Nations is the 2003 report by Commission on Human Security entitled *Human Security Now*. It is mentioned herein that health security was a central component of human security given that the protection of human life is considered as the essence of what human security is (Commission on Human Security 2003, 96). For the Commission on Human Security, infectious diseases constituted one of the three threats to health security and

acquired a global outreach which imposed a coordinated and constant response from international community (Commission on Human Security 2003, 97-98).

Another document which significantly influenced the understanding of human security at the UN level is *A more secure world – Our shared responsibility*, the report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (HLP) that was released in 2004. According to this document, the infectious disease represents a threat to human security that continued to become more dangerous mainly as a result of people suffering from newly emerged infection diseases and of inadequate international responses to diseases which affect people across the globe under the form of pandemics (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, 24-25).

HLP's report made reference to what was then the recent SARS pandemics which had erupted a year before its release and it commended the swift response on the part of international community, including that of World Health Organization, for enabling the control of the pandemic and the prevention of its spread to more countries. It is significant for the topic of this article the fact that the 1919 influenza pandemic was equally indicated as an example of threat to human security and the estimation that a similar disease occurring today would generate much more victims worldwide (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, 14).

HLP used the efficiency of international actions for containing the SARS pandemics as an argument in favour of the need for international actors to work together in view of fighting against threats to human security. Unlike UNDP, HLP explicitly indicated that pandemics represented a global threat to human security (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, 14), an approach which enables one to maintain that UNDP's concept of global human security could be adequately used to describe the view of HLP; in this context it is to be remarked that pandemics are included by HLP in the sphere of biological security, a concept that could be considered as a species of health security described by UNDP (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, viii). The global dimension of pandemics as a threat to human security is equally emphasised by HLP through indicating that the UN Security Council classified HIV as a threat to international peace and security (High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change 2004, 25), an approach implying that this UN organ had an important part to play in providing human security in case of pandemics.

Later on, in 2016, the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security released the *Human Security Handbook. An integrated approach for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals and the priority areas of the international community and the United Nations system* where pandemics are presented as a threat to human security and as an element which turns this concept into a people-centred one (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2016 a, 5, 9). Also, the mentioned document connects this threat with health security as one component of human security, a view that mirrors that of UNDP (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2016 a, 34).

Also in 2016, the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security initiated the global project *Mainstreaming the human security approach in strengthening the global health architecture* which was designed to prepare the health systems to effectively handle pandemics (United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security 2016 b).

Within the scientific literature, the inventories of threats to human security have regularly included pandemics, a fact which proves that they are conceived as a defining factor for human insecurity (Takasu 2014, 240; Axworthy 2014, 157; Tadjbakhsh; Chenoy 2007, 108).

It is also significant that the term *pandemic security* is used in the research field to illustrate how the process of securitization is applied to new security objects with the result that the threats to human security are multiplied and broadened (Burgess 2010).

The attention given by scholars, such as Stefan Elbe, to this new type of threat determined them to consider it in a historical perspective and thus to point out that infectious diseases spreading across borders have been addressed at European level beginning with the second half of the XIX-th century when Europeans faced a serious cholera outbreak and decided to tackle it by means of the first International Sanitary Conference organized in Paris (Elbe 2010, 163). Within the context of this article, it is significant that Elbe warned about the possibility of human security being severely endangered by an outbreak of an influenza pandemic having a devastating impact on human security worldwide and that he reflected upon consequences of the SARS pandemic (Elbe 2010, 169). Also, from a historical point of view, human security and pandemics, including flu pandemics caused by trans-species viruses, have been associated in what was termed as civilizational security (Bowden 2010) (11, 15).

Pandemic, particularly influenza pandemic, was equally considered in the context of biosecurity where it was discussed as a biological weapon gravely disrupting human security (Kuhlau, Frida; Hart, John 2010.)(176). The association between human security and pandemic have been discussed in relation with the city life which allowed one to depict pandemics as an urban threat to human security (Murakami Wood 2010) (199).

Pandemics have been instrumental in analytical approaches to the meaning of human security, where they have been referred to as threats to livelihoods of people alongside food insecurity and unemployment (Tadjbakhsh, Shahrbanou; Chenoy, Anuradha M. 2007) (44), and played a part in retracing the evolution of its reception in international institutional context (Kuhlau, Frida; Hart, John 2010) (85). Global pandemics were considered as an explanation for the conceptualizing human security as a type of modern biopolitics justifying interventionist policies of Northern developed states directed at developing states from the South (Ryerson 2014) (99) and as a significant contributing factor to the move, initiated after the end of the Cold War, towards complementing state security with human security (Jolly 2014) (144).

Conclusions

Human security framed the response to COVID-19 pandemic because this plague was conceived as a threat to the lives of people and given that human security refers to the security needs of human beings and thus provides a theoretical grounding for the securitization of pandemics, a possibility which does not exist if the traditional concept of security, which operates exclusively with a military understanding of security, is employed. The establishment of a connection between COVID-19 pandemic and human security was facilitated by the fact that, since human security was introduced in 1994 by the United Nations Development Programme, pandemic was understood as a threat to human security in UN documents relevant for the development of human security as well as in the scientific literature on this concept. Consequently, the use of human security terms in the discourse on COVID-19 pandemic represents the application of the human security concept and it will further consolidate the importance of pandemics for human security.

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