

Conceptual Framework for Human Security<sup>1</sup>,  
Sabina Alkire, 16 February, 2002  
(Excerpt: Working Definition and Executive Summary)

***Working Definition and Executive Summary***

Human security has many useful definitions and characterizations.<sup>2</sup> Although these will be introduced and discussed shortly, this paper aims not to choose among them, but rather to provide a working definition of human security, and to show how it can form the basis for operational responses by many different institutions. This six-page executive summary opens with a “working definition” of human security, then provides a two page introduction to key terms, and a four-page summary of the main discussions set forward in the attached paper.

The proposed working definition is as follows:

**Working Definition:**

**The objective of human security is to safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfillment.<sup>3</sup>**

Human security take its shape from the human being: the vital core that is to be protected. Institutions that undertake to protect human security will not be able to promote every aspect of human well-being. But at very least they must protect this core of people’s lives. The next sections introduce the terms of the working definition in order:

**Safeguard**

Human security is deliberately *protective*. It recognizes that people and communities are fatally threatened by events well beyond their control: a financial crisis, a violent conflict, AIDS, a national policy that undercuts public and private investments in health care, a terrorist attack, water shortages, chronic destitution, or pollution in a distant land. Many threats are far more destructive if they come as a surprise. The damage and deaths of an earthquake can be minimized by producing earthquake resistant buildings; the impoverishing effects of a financial crisis can be mitigated if counter-measures are put in place in advance; early warning systems can reduce the effect of famine. Yet many of these preparations require threats to be

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<sup>2</sup> Adelman 2001, Axworthy 1997, Bajpai 2000, Bedeski 1998, Bruderlein 2001, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Canada 2001, Dorn 1999-2000, Edralin 2000, Edson 2001, Florini and Simmons 1998, Goulding 1997, Hampson *et al.* 2002, Heinbecker 2000, Kay 1997, Kilgour 2000, Kim and Hyun 2000, King and Murray 2000, Kirton 2000, Leaning and Arie 2000, Leaning *et al.* 1999, Nef 1999, Newman and Richmond 2001, Ogata 1999, 2001a and b; Matsumae and Chen 1995, McRae and Hubert 2001, O’Neill 1997, Paris 2001, Rothschild 1995, Sen 2000, Smith and Stohl 2000, Tehranian 1999, Thomas 2000, Tow *et al.* 2000, UNDP 1994, 1998, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Alternate phrasings of this definition include:

1. The objective of human security is to protect the vital core of all human lives. (instead of protect: shield, guarantee, defend, maintain, uphold, preserve, secure, safeguard, ensure that...are shielded)
2. The objective of human security is to protect the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats in a way that is consistent with long-term human fulfillment. (*initial definition was this*)
3. The objective of human security is to guarantee a set of vital rights and freedoms to all people, without unduly compromising their ability to pursue other goals.
4. The objective of human security is to create political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental conditions in which people live knowing that their vital rights and freedoms are secure.
5. The objective of human security is to keep critical pervasive threats from invading the vital core of human lives.

acknowledged, before they occur (or at the very least, as they occur). The human security approach urges institutions to offer protection which is institutionalised, not episodic; responsive, not rigid; preventative, not reactive. In this way, people will face inevitable downturns “with security.”<sup>4</sup>

Safeguarding human lives implicates not only those institutions that intend to promote human security overtly, but also institutions that unintentionally undermine it. The strategies that are associated with *providing* human security identify the threats and then seek to prevent threats from materializing, mitigate harmful effects for those that eventuate, and help victims cope. But there is a second strategic approach to human security protection, which is *respect*. Respect for human security means that *whatever their primary objective may be*, all actors, whether institutional or corporate or individual, must ascertain that their actions do not foreseeably albeit unintentionally, threaten human security. This sense of respect has a close relationship to respect for individual human beings.

The term ‘safeguard’ must not be misunderstood. Human security is people-centred, not threat-centred. Human security is a condition that results from an effective political, economic, social, cultural, and natural environment, and not from executing a set of administrative procedures. But to uphold human security effectively, a proactive attitude towards threats – whether they are sudden threats such as an earthquake or the ongoing threats faced by the destitute – is essential.

Finally, the term safeguard is intended to convey a sense of dependability. It will be unprecedented not to mention difficult to protect human security with the kind of force and effectiveness that characterises responses to national security threats. But the aim of human security is to do precisely that.

### **Vital Core**

Human security is contained in scope. It does not cover all necessary, important, and profound aspects of human living. Rather, it identifies and protects a limited vital core of human activities and abilities. These may be variously described by certain fundamental human rights, basic capabilities, or absolute needs.

The “vital core” is a non-technical term for the concerns that lie behind human security. It may be defined in the space of capabilities, the freedom people have to do and to be. Elements of the vital core are fundamental human rights which all persons and institutions are obliged to respect or provide, even if the obligations are not perfectly specifiable. The rights and freedoms in the vital core pertain to survival, to livelihood, and to basic dignity. Persons who enjoy rudimentary security as to their survival, livelihood, and dignity even during terrible circumstances of poverty or war or disaster, would be better off than billions are today.

The working definition does not specify the rights and freedoms that pertain to the vital core beyond identifying these three categories. The task of prioritizing among rights and capabilities, each of which is argued by some to be fundamental, is a value judgement and a difficult one, which may be best undertaken by appropriate institutions. Yet the judgment is necessary if human security is to be realistic and effective. So there is a foreseeable tension between (i) the need for participatory engagement and scrutiny of this “core” by many, especially by those whose security is endangered, and (ii) the need for international agencies, NGOs, and public institutions, among others, clearly to define a “vital core” and to create procedures and institutions that prepare to protect it effectively. The imperfect but operational response to this tension is to maintain a self-consciously vague, wide working definition of human security, and to articulate *procedures* for operationalizing this definition in concrete situations by constrained institutions, for particular populations.

### **All Human Lives**

Human security is “people-centred”; it focuses the attention of institutions on human individuals and their communities worldwide. This emphasis on human beings distinguishes human security from the objective of protecting state territories that dominated security policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Human security shifts that focus to persons, regardless of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, citizenship, or other distinguishing characteristics.

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<sup>4</sup> Sen 2000

In this way the human security approach parallels the movement in economic development and international law to shift the emphasis from instrumental objectives (such as growth, or state rights) to human development and human rights. In doing so the human being becomes the “end” of development, not only as a “means” to increased economic productivity or legal coherence, and these various activities in turn become “people-centred”.

It may be important to note that human security does not *obviate* state security, nor does it encompass all of the security agenda (which also includes for example territorial integrity and the distribution of power among nations). Furthermore, the focus on “all human lives” does *not* require or assume a humanitarian or altruistic motivation. Actions that protect human security will often be justified within a group’s or nation’s self-interest, narrowly defined, and will often require this political appeal. At the same time, human security sketches out how national governments can reorient their own security policies, providing the same rigour and force, but with a somewhat different emphasis.

### **Critical and Pervasive Threats**

The focus of human security is squarely on human lives. But in order to protect human lives effectively, actors must deliberately identify and prepare for distinct threats. Threats to human security are *critical* – that is, they threaten to cut into the core activities and functions of human lives. Such threats may be sudden – as in economic collapse – but they need not be, for what defines a threat as critical is its tragic depth rather than its suddenness. Furthermore, the threats are *pervasive* – meaning (i) the threat is large scale (within the population under consideration; what is large scale will differ for local vs. international institutions); and/or<sup>5</sup> (ii) the threat may come again and again over time; it is not an anomalous event for which strategic preparation is impossible. Of course pervasive threats may not *occur* ‘en mass’; a man may be incapacitated by a work accident, or by a wild animal; his family may live henceforth in penury. This may seem to be an isolated rather than pervasive incident, yet it is multiplied millions of times over, making health insecurity qualify as a pervasive threat.

Human security threats have different mechanisms of operation. Some, such as genocide or soil degradation, threaten lives *directly*. Others are *indirect* threats: for example, when overinvestment in military or in debt repayment causes underinvestment in other areas, to an extent that leads to the collapse of the public health care sector, or when a country traditionally underinvests in education. Human security relates to the identification and assessment of both kinds of threats: those that are deliberately orchestrated, and those that arise inadvertently or structurally. For the human costs of each are high.

### **Human Fulfilment**

Human security focuses on a limited core of individual activities and abilities, on a minimal subset of human development and human rights. It is not sufficient for human fulfilment or flourishing, which is the ongoing process of seeking and realizing values by people in groups and communities. It would, therefore, be unfortunate or even tragic if institutions aiming to achieve human security were to accomplish their objective in such a way that undermined people’s ability to be fulfilled and enjoy a far greater range of freedoms. People’s lives must not only be protected per se; they must be protected in a manner that is consistent with their long-term good. The importance of processes – of governance, of participation, of transparency, of capacity-building and institution-building – can hardly be overestimated. The appropriate way to effect this consistency between protection and longer term development will vary. Rudimentary poverty programs may attend to wider goals simply by encouraging deep participation; refugee camps may teach transferable vocational skills or may be sited where they will not degrade the local environment. In some places dangers, climate, or the rhythm of grief may be such that longer term considerations should be set aside for awhile. But they should not ever fall entirely from view.

The attention to longer term individual and group commitments does not threaten the focus of human security, because as the first part of the working definition clarifies, the priority of human security is to be effective – to protect human security in fact and not intention only. “In the final analysis, human

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘or’ is used because some potential threats – environmental and nuclear – may be of such magnitude that they could not recur. But they nonetheless might be prevented.

security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced.”<sup>6</sup> Concerns of feasibility are real; thus concern for realizing practical outcomes is basic to human security endeavours.

### Summary of Sections Two to Five:

Why has human security risen to the fore of so many groups and conversations? The energy seems to arise from a mismatch between the security threats (that have changed dramatically with globalisation and technological advance) and the response in countries and by the international community to these threats. Although some threats have doubtlessly grown since the Cold War, so too has our capacity to counter them. Other threats have declined. Section 2 introduces these familiar issues. It identifies three descriptions of the altered security environments that are noted by nearly every contributor to the discussion:

- 1) *Empirically observable* changes in the nature of security threats, and in our ability to address them.
- 2) *Analytical* advances in the ability to understand the interdependence between different security threats, and also between the security of fellow citizens and persons across the globe.
- 3) *Institutional* changes both within security structures and at the national and international levels. These changes include the establishment of international crime and terrorist networks on the one hand, and deep international cooperation and collaboration in problem-solving on the other.

The need for a working definition of human security thus arises out of a real problem: how to frame a feasible and coherent set of priorities for concerted action. It is not an abstract question. The danger of inaction, and the danger of dissipation, are real.

Conceptions of human security vary widely (Section 3). The UNDP 1994 *Human Development Report* crafted by Mahbub ul Haq set the tone for all succeeding definitions by articulating a universal, preventive, “people-centred” approach that focused jointly on “freedom from fear and freedom from want.” Rothschild grounds human security by identifying linkages with security concepts at other points in history, and by articulating how human security extends the dominant approach to state security in Europe. She also proposes how to make human security less inclusive and hence feasible. Other authors develop *multidimensional* accounts of human security that are *focused on people* but differ in emphases. For example King and Murray leave violence aside and propose a human security index that measures the “years lived outside a state of generalized poverty.” Leaning and Arie argue that human security is a precondition of human development but include in their definition not only minimal standards of living but also cultural and psychological security that arises from social networks and attitudes towards the future. Hampson *et al.* describe human security as an underprovided public good which protects “core human values.” Thomas defends a wide definition of human security, which includes basic material needs, human dignity, and democratic practice. Paris proposes that human security should be seen not as a concept but rather as a category of research into military and non-military threats to societies, groups, and individuals. In practice, the International Commission on Intervention and Sovereignty viewed human security as a central emerging concept for national and international institutions, particularly in view of the United Nations’ endorsement of this concept: “Ensuring human security is, in the broadest sense, the cardinal mission of the United Nations”. Japan’s foreign policy and the World Bank’s pillar of security in very different ways pursue the joint “freedom from fear and freedom from want.” Other nations such as Canada and Norway have developed an active agenda of discrete topics that populate the “freedom from fear” branch of concerns and lie within their own foreign policy. Both previous to and simultaneously with these proposals – most of which have emerged in the past year or two – a literature has arisen that criticizes the concept of human security, on the grounds that it is vague, incoherent, or merely impossible.

In contrast to the whirlwind of definitions that precede it, the working definition here (i) maintains the joint focus on poverty and violence rather than selecting one or the other; (ii) maintains the “people-centred” nature of the 1994 UNDP definition; (iii) maintains multidimensionality; (iv) narrows prior definitions by focusing on “critical and pervasive threats to the vital core of people’s lives”; (v) proposes that the normative objective of human security be specified and translated into operational policies and projects by principled procedures (which are suggested but not discussed extensively). This working

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<sup>6</sup> 1994:22

definition of human security is thus wide enough to incorporate many operational expressions of human security, which can be understood to be not “competing conceptions” but rather appropriate initiatives to protect human security in a concrete circumstance. It also recognizes that much of the energy needed to address human security concerns is politically as well as rationally determined. The working definition thus “leaves room for reality” while providing analytical tools and insights so that political priorities for human security may be better conceptualized and addressed.

Section Four deepens the discussion of “vital core.” The term “vital core” is not meant to be precise; it suggests a minimal or basic set of capabilities or human rights or absolute poverties. What is this core? It is founded not on a fragile consensus nor on the identification of threats, but rather on practical reasoning about what is basic to a human life. In general terms, the vital core of human security may be thought of as a rudimentary set of human freedoms, or as some set of human rights. The vital core includes both political and civil liberties (related to ‘negative freedoms’), and economic, social, and cultural abilities (related to ‘positive freedoms’).

The strengths and limitations of this working definition can be seen by considering one particular element of human security, such as the freedom from premature preventable death. People who are trying to survive – whether it be a woman locking her door at night, or taking her children to be vaccinated – do not choose between addressing “violence threats” or “poverty threats”. They address both. Human security should do likewise. But people also risk their lives as fire-fighters and in sports, thus human security should leave people free to undertake valuable activities that are risky to some degree. Also, the protection even of the freedom from premature preventable death is complicated and requires vexing value judgments: what is “preventable”; which threats loom the largest; which means should we use? An example of this is where to set speed limits in order to prevent automobile accidents. These vexing issues recur with other dimensions of human security. In order to be relevant in different cultures and circumstances, a sound conceptual framework must be flexible as well as concrete – to allow for specifications that change over time and contexts. But this means that many pressing questions will be resolved only in practice, after both threats and implementing institutions have been identified.

Section Five relates this definition of human security to concepts of state security, human development, and human rights. There are a number of strong similarities between human and *state security*. Both proactively identify and prioritize critical and pervasive threats to the security of key populations, on the basis of empirical evidence and strategic analyses. At present both recognize key threats to be conflict, AIDS and disease, economic and financial instability, and terrorism. Both also develop systematic, comprehensive, durable, and coordinated institutional responses to selected threats that involve multiple actors and range from research to field action. The preparedness and response mechanisms use legal, political, sectoral, and economic as well as authorized military instruments.

Two differences between state and human security are also of note. First, state security largely concerns territorial units and the persons who dwell within them. Actions that promote the “human security” of other populations are usually justified instrumentally, because investments in their security are beneficial to national security; human security addresses all people. Second, state security is also significantly concerned with the relative distribution of power between states and with territorial integrity; this agenda is legitimate and lively and complements, but is not part of, the human security agenda.

Human Security shares the “conceptual space” of *human development*, which is likewise people-centred and multidimensional and is defined in the space of human choices and freedoms. But human development is a broader, long term, holistic objective that can capture the aspirations of any society, whether rich or chronically poor. The aim of human development is the flourishing or fulfilment of individuals in their homes and communities, and the expansion of valuable choices. In contrast, human security has a strictly delimited scope. While both approaches address those who are already destitute, human security also has a systematic preventative aspect. While human development aims at “growth with equity,” human security focuses on “downturn with security.”<sup>7</sup> The human security approach identifies and prepares for recessions, conflicts, emergencies, and the darker events of society. Finally, human security

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<sup>7</sup> Both quoted phrases from Sen 2000

activities may at times have a much shorter time horizon, and include emergency relief work and peacekeeping as well as longer term human and institutional development.

Human Security and *human rights* are likewise deeply interconnected. Both are concerned to identify a rudimentary set of universal concerns that span poverty and violence. In fact fundamental human rights are arguably an appropriate working set for the “vital core” of human lives. However this paper leaves open the possibility that because of its focus on feasibility, human security may not necessarily prioritise all human rights equally, and in practice different institutions that respect or promote human security will legitimately prioritise and address only certain rights and freedoms. Still, to the extent that human security concerns at least some rights, institutions are clearly obligated to provide it.

The task of conceptualizing human security systematically may seem at times pedantic. In part, this may be in the nature of the presentation; one looks forward to a text with rich analyses and catching phrases and stories of hope. But then again there is a steady seriousness about the whole enterprise of protecting security. Not only are failures agonizing and human-made threats disheartening, but even success itself is less than rosy, precisely because the objective of human security is incomplete. People whose “vital core” is secure still face a universe of challenges, and obligations towards them are not fulfilled merely because they are not in grave risk. Yet social, political, diplomatic, economic, military, scientific, and technological institutions are unable to protect populations from all that threatens them. According to the human security agenda, whatever else these institutions undertake – and whether they work at the local, national, or international level – they *must* endeavour to safeguard the vital core functions of people everywhere. And they must do so in a way that does not compromise people and societies in the long term. Such an outcome is positive. When a mother is conscious that she and her family are not threatened by some problems (smallpox, for example) hers is, or can be, a more optimistic life. Human security can be a source of hope.

*Figure 1: Summary of Human Security Conceptual Framework*

<b><u>Working Definition:</u></b>	
<b>The objective of human security is to safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, without impeding long-term human fulfilment.</b>	
<b>Safeguard</b>	Provide and Promote Human Security by: Identification (of critical pervasive threats) Prevention (so that the risks do not occur) Mitigation (so that if risks occur the damage is limited) Response (so that victims or chronic poor survive with dignity and maintain their livelihoods) Respect Human Security by Identification, Prevention, and Mitigation of predictable side-effects that threaten human security, regardless of the primary objective
<b>Vital core</b>	A rudimentary but multidimensional set of human rights and human freedoms based in practical reason Spans the freedom from fear and the freedom from want To be specified by appropriate procedures in context
<b>All human lives</b>	“People-centred”- focused on individuals and their communities Universal and non-discriminatory
<b>Critical pervasive threats</b>	Critical threats cut into core activities and functions Pervasive threats are large-scale, recurrent dangers Threats may be direct, such as genocide or a civil war Threats may also be indirect, for example underinvestment or financial collapse.
<b>Long-term human fulfilment</b>	Human security is not sufficient for human fulfilment. Human security processes should be consistent with ongoing human development by supporting participation, freedom, institutional appropriateness, and diversity.