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Human Security:
A Response to the Climate Security Debates

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Debates about climate change as a threat to international peace have focused on conflict, civil unrest, and the consequences for states. Human security offers an alternative, people-centred approach to understanding the security implications of climate change.

IN JUNE this year, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Resolution sponsored by the Pacific Island states on climate change and its possible security implications. In early August, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon spoke at a Global Environment Forum in South Korea, at about the same time that governments were meeting in Bonn for five days of informal climate negotiations. He warned that failure to act quickly on climate change could lead to a worsening of tensions, social unrest and even violence.

Threat Multplier?

While the Secretary-General also recognised that climate change could bring catastrophe for humankind, this concern for human security has not been especially prominent in the raft of recent reports on the apparent links between climate change and national and international security. The focus in most of those reports has been on climate change as a threat multiplier, even though the empirical grounds for making such claims remain largely untested.

Resource scarcity (particularly water and energy), food insecurity, contraction of livelihood opportunities, pressures from growing numbers of climate refugees, and a politics of resentment within and between countries are often linked with national security concerns. The argument is that

these pressures will overstretch societies' adaptive capacities or create or exacerbate political instability through civil unrest, intercommunal violence, political radicalisation and possibly even state failure.

A Human Security Approach

In contrast to this focus on security of and for the state, a human security approach to climate change offers non-traditional answers to the traditional questions -- security for whom and from what. A human security model which takes people (or peoples) as the security referent questions the 'taken for granted' assumptions and analyses in the policy community about climate change, threat and (in)security.

It takes, as its starting point, the potentially devastating impact of climate change on people and their communities. It demands that we worry about the way that climate-related food insecurity, malnutrition and an increased disease burden destroys lives and livelihoods, and exacerbates poverty and misery for the millions of people who are affected, rather than worrying about this only as a trigger for civil unrest and potential extremism.

Under a human security model, vulnerability to the kinds of disasters of nature and humanitarian crises that accompany severe climate change become a matter for concern. This is because it undermines the security and resilience of people and their communities -- not just because it demands financial and physical intervention and stretching of peacetime military deployment by countries with the capacity to do so. From a human security perspective, forced migration from unsustainable or uninhabitable lands is a source of insecurity for those whose lands and homes can no longer sustain them. This challenges the representation of 'climate refugees' or climate migrants as a potential source of pressure on or threat to states.

Climate Insecurities in the Asia Pacific

These are very real issues for the people – and for countries – in the Asia Pacific. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has reported a worrying litany of climate change impacts for the region: a decline in crop yield; an increase in climate-induced diseases; an increased risk of hunger and water resource scarcity; an increase in the number and severity of glacier melt-related floods; significant loss of coastal ecosystems; many millions of people in coastal communities at high risk from flooding; and an increased risk of extinction for many species of fauna and flora.

Of the ten countries in the world most imperilled by climate change in terms of the *number* of people likely to be affected, six are in the Asia Pacific region: China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. The unpredictability of wet and dry seasons is already having an impact on agriculture, with harvests being disrupted, rural incomes dropping, and hunger and malnutrition increasing, especially among children. Up to an extra 130 million people in Asia are anticipated to be at risk of hunger as a result of climate change and shortfalls in food production. The disease and health burden is likely to be exacerbated, not only by the impact of food insecurity but by an increase in diarrhoeal and other infectious diseases.

Most parts of the Asia Pacific are projected to experience increased water stress. Climate-related disruptions of human populations are thought likely within states and across national borders with sudden sharp spikes in rural to urban migration. Many of the largest cities in the Asia Pacific are highly vulnerable to rising sea-levels, including Shanghai, Tianjin, Jakarta, Tokyo, Osaka-Kobe, and Bangkok, with increased vulnerability for urban populations. Climate change will create further economic uncertainties, and not just for the region's poorest countries although they are likely to be the economies that are least resilient, at least in the short-term.

Advancing Adaptation Strategies

Non-traditional security challenges such as climate change require non-traditional security responses. From a policy perspective, however, understanding how to achieve human security (rather than just how to define it) is a complex challenge. We know that in the Asia Pacific, as elsewhere, it is too late to rely only on strategies to reduce or mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. A human security approach to the regional impacts of climate change points to the importance of strategies and policies for adaptation. The imperative is to reduce vulnerability and build social resilience by strengthening the ability of communities to cope with and adapt to significant social disruption or external stresses and disturbances such as those associated with climate change. This must involve 'bottom-up' policy-making that engages with and listens to the voices of those who are most at risk and most disadvantaged by climate change.

We know that adaptive capacity is low in many parts of the region. The barriers to and the limits and costs of adaptation are less well known. There is, therefore, an important role for governments, civil society, the private sector and research institutions in furthering our understanding of what kinds of resilience and adaptation strategies will work most effectively within and across the region if both devastating human insecurities and the potential for climate-related conflict are to be avoided.

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