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Human security twenty years on

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Executive summary

The concept of human security, which made its international debut in the 1994 UNDP *Human Development Report*, adds a people-centred dimension to the traditional security, development and human rights frameworks while locating itself in the area where they converge. Ever since, a number of countries have used the concept for their foreign and aid policies. Although it became the subject of a 2012 General Assembly Resolution, the concept still courts controversy and rejection twenty years after its introduction. Politically, its close association with the notion of the Responsibility to Protect in debates about international interventions has alienated Southern countries that are sceptical about violations of state sovereignty and new conditionalities for receiving aid. No country has adopted it as a goal at the national level, raising scepticism about its utility for domestic policymaking. Yet the concept represents a malleable tool for analysing the root causes of threats and their multidimensional consequences for different types of insecurities. It can be operationalised through applying specific principles to policymaking and can be used as an evaluative tool for gauging the impact of interventions on the dynamics of other fields. The article suggests that Norway not only pursues the goal of human security at the global level, but that it also leads in adopting it as a national goal by scrutinising the country's domestic policies using this approach.

Still shaky after twenty years[1]

Often, in the space where the policy, political and academic arenas converge, much ink is spilled in defence of a very simple idea. Explaining what human security is and why it is important is one of those exercises. In its most common understanding and usage, human security is a people-centred approach to identifying and responding to threats to the security of people and communities, as opposed to that of states, institutions and the regional/international system. In its broadest definition, human security is defined in terms of a triad: freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from indignities. Since it entered mainstream international policy through the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) *Human Development Report* (HDR), however, this commonsense idea has courted controversy. Critiques – of which there are many – have negated its value as an analytical framework, rejected its utility as a policy agenda, and even opposed its very existence as a concept. Among mainstream scholars who have accepted its validity, many have nonetheless narrowed its pertinence down to circumstances commonly dedicated to the realm of humanitarianism: wars, conflicts, genocides, extreme violence, gross violations of human rights, etc. To those critics who lament the normativity and subjectivity of a prescriptive (as opposed to descriptive) concept, one should respond by recalling that all acts of defining or delimiting, even in an academic milieu, cannot be objective exercises dissociated from political considerations in terms of ideology, time, money and the will to act on behalf of others. Human security is decidedly normative, and belongs – much like the human development concept launched in the early 1990s – to the realm of ethics.

1 An appendix gives the key stages in the development of the concept of human security as part of international thinking starting in 1992.

The concepts of "security" and "insecurity" have relative connotations in different contexts. For states, security is linked to the use of force, power and defence (the protection of borders, armies, etc.). For individuals living in states, security can be the assurance that what has been gained today will not be lost tomorrow. Insecurity, therefore, can refer to the loss of the guarantee of access to jobs, health care, social welfare, education, etc. as much as to the fear – objective and subjective – that arises from domestic violence, political instability, crime, displacement, etc. The meaning of security for a refugee fleeing war, a farmer losing his crops to drought, an elderly couple losing their assets following a banking crisis, and a woman scared of her violent husband is decisively different from what it means to a state on the brink of collapse, failure or invasion. Security is freedom from danger, a threat or a risk. What that threat is depends invariably on the context and can be anything from a sudden clear and present danger to a chronic violation of human dignity. Threats to people, most often related to each other in a domino effect, can be to their survival (physical abuse, violence, persecution or death), their livelihoods (unemployment, food insecurity, health threats, etc.), and their dignity (lack of human rights, inequality, exclusion, discrimination, etc.). To be meaningful, therefore, human security needs to be recognised at the micro level in terms of people's everyday experiences.

It would be appropriate to recall that the components of the definition of human security are not new. Freedom from fear and freedom from want were first introduced by President F. D. Roosevelt in 1941 as part of his vision for a world founded on four essential human freedoms, and in 1945 by the U.S. secretary of state speaking on the results of the conference in San Francisco that established the UN:

> The battle of peace has to be fought on two fronts. The first is the security front where victory spells freedom from fear. The second is the economic and social front where victory means freedom from want. Only victory on both fronts can assure the world of an enduring peace. No provisions that can be written into the Charter will enable the Security Council to make the world secure from war if men and women have no security in their homes and their jobs.

On the international scene, these two freedoms became associated with human security through the 1994 HDR, which hoped for a peace dividend at the end of the cold war. Freedom from indignity was gradually added in the late 2000s when the human rights agenda picked up momentum. In 1990 the Pakistani economist Mahbub Ul Haq summarised the goal of development with a simple yet revolutionary statement in the first UNDP HDR: "The obvious is the most difficult to see: the true wealth of a country is its people." By the 1994 HDR he had made another key statement:

> Human security is a child that did not die, a disease that did not spread, an ethnic violence that did not explode, a woman who was not raped, a poor person who did not starve, a dissident who was not silenced, a human spirit that was not crushed. Human security is not a concern with weapons. It is a concern with human dignity.

In May 1998 Canada's foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy, and Norway's foreign minister, Knut Vollebæk, along with a number of their counterparts from like-minded countries, met in Bergen to sign the Lysøen Declaration, which led to the creation of the now-13-member Human Security Network. In the past twenty years, to such global commitments have been added a Commission on Human Security set up in 2001; a Trust Fund for Human Security initially set up by the Japanese government and now including other donors, which has provided the largest contribution to the UN; a dedicated Human Security Unit in the UN; and a Friends of Human Security Network. After seven years of debates and successive reports of the UN secretary general, a General Assembly resolution was adopted in September 2012 that squarely positioned human security at the intersection of peace, development and human rights. This resolution laid down a common understanding of human security as an "approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people" (UNGA, 2012). This common understanding is constituted by the broad definition of human security as freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom from indignity.

Yet despite the commissions, resolutions, reports, declarations and a multimillion-dollar Trust Fund, and despite the consensus of like-minded countries on the protection of people, human security is far from having been achieved, or even adopted as a global – let alone national – goal. Wars continue to ravage many countries, poverty endures globally and mismanaged interventions persist. At the same time, cycles of financial crisis, pandemics, natural calamities, rising food prices, etc. have proved again and again how ill adapted the state-based vision of security is, with its traditional focus on the safety of nation states and defence against aggression from other states. These multiple crises have shaken the economies, security and even sovereignty of nation states, but they have had primarily disastrous consequences, often in a domino effect, for the survival and well-being of individuals across and within national boundaries. An alternative paradigm is still necessary to capture the wider range of threats and the needs and priorities of the human inhabitants of states. Multidimensional responses are needed to protect, build resilience, prevent calamities or mitigate the negative impacts when they occur.

Despite the obvious need for an alternative paradigm, the term "human security" still courts rejection twenty years after its inception. Accused of having both a vague and an ambitious definition, it circulates in the shadows of

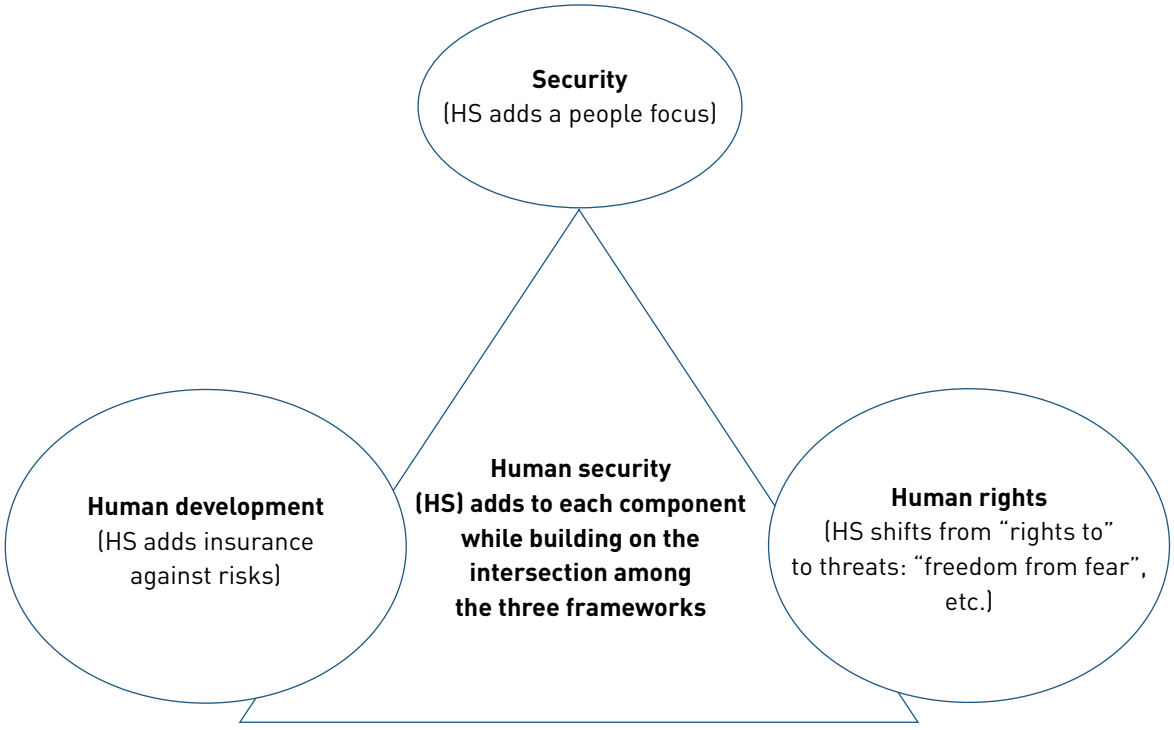
universities and public policy arenas trying to be more than a rallying cry. While its call for inter-sectorality falls on deaf ears because of silo arrangements in contemporary institutions, would it be fair to judge the concept as obsolete and impractical, when the failure to put it into practice is dictated not by necessity, ethics and values, but by real politik, resources and interests? Despite its opponents, this concept still deserves to be defended, because it is a noble, humanist idea that trumpets the overarching superiority of human beings over other ends such as institutions, the market, states, society, etc.

Variations on traditional frameworks

Is the concept of "human security" old wine in a new bottle or does it really add value to existing frameworks? This broad approach introduces a people-centred dimension to the traditional security, human development and human rights fields, while locating itself in the area of convergence among them.

The approach can be considered an ethical rupture with traditional security paradigms (by making the security of people and communities as the ultimate goal), and a methodological one (with the idea that by securing individuals, the security of the state, the region and the international system can also be better ensured). For the authors of the UNDP HDR, the distinction in terms of the human development approach was and is more than semantics: if human development is about widening people's choices and ensuring growth with equity, human security is about enabling people to exercise these choices safely and freely, and to be relatively confident that the opportunities they have today will not be lost tomorrow. In policy terms, the concept calls for development policies/programmes that focus on sustainability and building resilience to help people prevent or mitigate risks. It also encourages the evaluation of the impact of development interventions in terms of how individuals feel safe and secure in the broad sense of these terms.

Figure 1: The value of a human security approach



The human security approach shares human rights concerns about protecting freedoms, human dignity and morality. It also shares content: threats to human security in their broad definition – fear, want and indignities – find echo in first- (civil and political rights), second- (economic and social rights) and third-generation human rights (solidarity rights). Yet, while human rights are rooted in legal norms and international covenants and agreements, human security focuses on protection from critical and pervasive threats, but does not have a normative/obligatory framework. The human security approach helps identify the rights at stake in a particular context and emphasises conditions that allow human rights to take root.

Political challenges

In Ul Haq's original statement, human security was supposed to mend the North/South divide, since, as he put it, it was applicable to people everywhere. Yet immediately after its launch, the concept was met with scepticism from G-77 countries during the 1995 World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen for fear it would lead to

violations of state sovereignty. Countries of the global South feared that the new concept would become a tool for the West to impose its liberal values and order, and for big powers to justify their ad hoc interventions abroad. They also feared that human security might be used as a new conditionality for receiving aid. The scepticism was proved partly right when the debate at the global level increasingly associated two *faux amis*: human security with interventions in the name of the Responsibility to Protect (RTP).

The forced marriage between the human security and RTP norms came about mainly through a Canadian effort to galvanise action for the protection of civilians during conflicts. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which the Canadians set up in 2001, determined that under certain well-defined circumstances interventions could be legitimised in countries where the state – because it was either weak or predatory – could not or did not protect the security of individuals. The commission's report placed equal emphasis on the responsibility to prevent, to protect and to rebuild, but political events cast mostly the RTP norm into the global limelight. No matter how much the original RTP report of the ICISS sought to put brakes on trigger-happy interventions, it became associated with action on behalf of the needy, and by implication, those whose human security had been violated by states unwilling or unable to protect their citizens.

For countries wishing to "act" in the aftermath of humanitarian emergencies, the concept has become a rallying point to justify interventions not out of national interest, but out of concerns for other nations' suffering people. For countries of the South, however, such ethical concerns are often seen as excuses for selective interventions and interference in the affairs of sovereign states in the name of human rights, while failing to address ills such as the asymmetrical use of force. Perceptions of double standards, excessive moralism, selectivity and bias that have shrouded debates on international interventions in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya have prevented developing countries from warming to the concept thus tainted with the RTP. The UN General Assembly, in an attempt to build consensus among its Southern member states, tried to dissociate the two in a 2012 resolution by explicitly stating that the notion of human security does not entail the threat or use of force or coercive actions. It must be

> implemented with full respect for the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for the sovereignty of States, territorial integrity and non-interference in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of States (UN, 2012).

A key way in which fears of intervention and breaches of sovereignty could be alleviated would be to address a broader range of threats to individuals' security, i.e. not only acts of direct violence, but also acts of structural violence, such as those associated with lack of development or the inability to mitigate the impact of natural disasters, for example. It would also require more focus on the responsibility of the international community to prevent crises through long-term engagement, e.g. through putting development at the core of trade policies, upholding industrialised countries' commitments to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by eliminating their own nuclear arsenals, setting a new code of conduct for arms sales to poorer nations, etc. In the final analysis, equating the human security approach with the RTP agenda has an additional danger because it disempowers people on whose behalf interventions are supposed to be made. After all, the empowerment of communities and people to ensure their own security is one of the principal means of bringing about a durable peace, and not all populations can be assumed to be as powerless as they may seem within the debate about the residual responsibility of the international community to "act".

A second apprehension about the political currency of the concept is both caused by and manifested in the fact that while human security has been adapted as foreign and aid policy tools by a number of countries in the past two decades, no country has adopted it as a national policy agenda. Canada, Japan, briefly Norway and now Switzerland have at different points based their foreign policies on the human security principle, on the premise that the security of people in other states/regions would trickle out from security at home. Human security relegated to foreign policy as enlightened self-interest became a good that some better-off countries were able to provide to others through external relations or aid.

Why this has happened could be explained by the fact that the most vocal proponents of human security have all mostly been involved in international relations, be it Canadian ex-foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy, his Japanese counterpart Keizo Obuchi, Thai ex-foreign minister and ex-secretary general of the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) Surin Pitsuwan and Norwegian ex-foreign minister Knut Vollebæk. With their interest in carving a niche on the international scene and projecting a positive image for their middle-power countries, they may have neglected to build up a momentum for a debate in their own countries for domestic applicability. Yet there is no reason why the concept could not officially feature within or even replace the national security agenda, for example. Relegation to the domain of foreign or aid policy implies, falsely, that human security is not universally applicable to people's daily concerns – no matter where they live geographically – or that industrialised societies are immune to insecurities. The reality of urban violence, rising food prices, pockets of poverty, social exclusion, the crisis of multiculturalism, and even the loneliness and depression of the elderly could – and in fact should – be addressed through a broadened security agenda at the national level.

Policy possibilities

While political resistance has been robust, the concept has not been without policymaking potential. The "human" has been put on the agenda of those traditionally concerned with state and national security. The well-being and protection of individuals and communities caught in conflicts have been debated at the UN Security Council, starting with the lobbying efforts of Canada as a non-permanent member during 1999-2000. Women's roles as both subjects and objects of peace and security have been recognised through the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000. Concerns for people's security have led to landmark agreements through the Kimberley Diamond Certification process, the bans on anti-personnel mines and child soldiers, etc. Regional organisations such as the European Union (EU) and ASEAN have been at the forefront of introducing the human element into regional security, be it in the context of peacebuilding or protecting people from financial crises. At the national level, increasing numbers of national security strategies have introduced special considerations for food security, environmental security and even economic security.

The paradigm shift that human security represents is not only an intellectual critical exercise to debunk the primacy and prerogative of the state, but can also be a cutting edge policy tool for comprehensive analysis, policymaking and evaluation. The concept can be used analytically to recognise the widespread threats people face and their root causes, as well as their multidimensional consequences for different insecurities (political, economic, health, food, community, personal and environmental). From such a multidimensional analysis of the way that threats affect one other in a domino effect comes the need for holistic responses. The challenge, however, is to overcome the way institutions are organised along unitary goals and expertise and how silo mentalities, turf battles and the absence of mechanisms for integration hamper possibilities for comprehensive responses. Integrated approaches require broad partnerships so that each partner brings its own specific knowledge, as well as cross-sectoral/integrated institutional frameworks that allow for cross-fertilisation.

The human security approach can further be used as a programmatic tool by applying a set of principles to policymaking. As UNGA (2012) states, the approach should be operationalised through policies and programmes that have the following characteristics:

(1) *People centred.* This is to ensure that individuals and communities can fulfil their proper role as both actors (agents) and subjects (beneficiaries) of interventions.

(2) *Interconnected and comprehensive*. Given that threats are mutually reinforcing and interlinked, careful coordination is needed to avoid negative harms while promoting the multiplying effects of positive interventions.

(3) *Context specific*. Although insecurities vary considerably across different settings and times, the human security framework is universal in that it is relevant to people everywhere. A response should therefore take the situation in its context and not impose one-size-fits-all approaches on very different settings.

(4) *Preventive measures.* Finally, the approach requires preventive measures that avert downside risks and stop these risks' impacts from escalating, which in turn requires an analysis of causes and risk factors; mature, effective early warning systems; and adequate coordination among the institutions involved.

Finally, the human security approach can be used as an evaluation tool by making policymakers aware of the negative and positive impacts of their interventions on the dynamics of other fields. If, in the final analysis, human security is about not doing harm, it can be used as a measuring rod to assess the effects of aid and interventions on people's lives, livelihoods and dignity.

An agenda for the 21st century

Should the human security approach continue to inform the foreign or aid policy of donor countries? There is no harm in this. However, the important breakthrough will come when industrialised donor countries, together with developing ones, apply the concept to their domestic policies. Immigration strategies, development plans, industrialisation, defence, counter-terrorism, urban development, crime prevention, and food and health security are all areas that deserve to be scrutinised from this people-centred perspective. The spirit of human security will continue to inform efforts towards conflict mediation and the protection of civilians in conflict zones, such as global attempts to curb drone wars. However, a true human security agenda should go beyond itemised approaches that form part of the "freedom from fear" agenda and find ways to help people secure gains made in their everyday lives, be it in terms of their livelihoods or their dignity.

While no country has adopted a human security strategy as such, a number of countries' policies have been directly informed by this agenda. For example, as Latvia wrestled with the changes imposed by EU membership, globalisation and rapid transition, the 2003 *National Human Development Report* measured perceptions of security and Latvia's "securitability", defined as an individual's ability to avoid insecure situations and retain a sense of security when such situations do occur, as well as the ability to re-establish security or a sense of security when these have been compromised, and to be secure even after disruptions of some kind. As the country is preparing to lead the EU in 2015, it has been developing the concept further in terms of resilience as one of its top priorities. Similarly, Costa Rica has introduced the idea of "social peace" in its national development agenda for 2011-14 based on the security of the individual. In Thailand, the need to develop a safety net

has been an integral part of the development agenda ever since the bitter lessons of the 1997 crisis, and today the country hosts a Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

In terms of Norway in particular, the human security agenda is an appropriate vehicle for the Norwegian government to pursue its focus on human rights at the international level while continuing to promote the country's economic and trade interests. Yet perhaps one of the best ways that Norway can contribute to furthering the human security agenda globally is to adopt it as an evaluative tool to assess its own domestic policies. An advisory group or support network of policymakers and academics could be formed to develop tools to review policies using the principles mentioned above, an exercise that could be conducted across policy areas pertaining not only to defence and law and order, but also to development, employment, immigration, etc. In this way, Norway could set an example that encourages other states to scrutinise their own policies. After all, this Nordic country is perfectly situated to prove that the sovereign state of the post-Westphalian order no longer has the sole responsibility to protect the safety of its citizens from external aggression, but should also uphold its duty to provide welfare and opportunities for its citizens so that they in turn can play a more active role in contributing to society. As such, Norway could show by example the value of finding the middle way between the (socialist) protective state and the (neoliberal) minimal state by showcasing a responsive state that is able to protect, provide for and empower its citizens.

Appendix 1: Evolution of the concept of human security in international politics

In the political world, the concept of human security has received attention over the years from various global and regional organisations.

1) 1992-95: the sceptical years

In 1992 UN secretary general Boutros-Boutros Ghali's Agenda for Peace made the first explicit reference to human security at the UN as part of international responsibilities regarding preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict recovery.

In 1994 the UNDP *Human Development Report* became the first text to stress the need for human security as part of the peace dividend at the end of the cold war.

At the 1995 Copenhagen Summit the concept was met with scepticism from the G-77 countries for fear it would lead to violations of state sovereignty.

2) 1996-2000: human security as a foreign policy tool of middle-power states

In 1996 Canada, led by Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, adopted the "freedom from fear" approach as its principal foreign policy tool. In doing so the Canadian government aimed to increase its presence as a peacekeeping force in international relations and also responded to active lobbying from a broad coalition of non-governmental organisations, which in formal partnership with the government successfully lobbied for the adoption of the treaty banning landmines and for the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In 1998 the Japanese government led by Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi endorsed the more comprehensive definition of human security based on a greater focus on "freedom from want" in addition to "freedom from fear" to support countries emerging from the Asian financial crisis. In this regard, following a significant contribution by the Japanese government, the UN Trust Fund for Human Security was established.

In 1999 the Human Security Network was created consisting of 13 "like-minded" countries – Austria, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Greece, Ireland, Jordan, Mali, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Slovenia and Thailand, with South Africa as an observer. Over the years their collective efforts have led to notable successes in the form of ad hoc campaigns that, for example, led to the signing of the Ottawa Convention to ban anti-personnel landmines (1997) and the creation of the ICC.

3) 2001-03: global commissions use different dimensions of the concept to define the contours of interventions and engagements

In 2001 the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, chaired by Gareth Evans and Mohammad Sahnoun, argued for the international community to adopt the norm of the "Responsibility to Protect" in situations of gross violations of human rights. This redefined the meaning of sovereignty to include dual responsibility – externally to respect the sovereignty of other states and internally to respect the dignity and basic rights of all people within a particular state.

In 2003 the Independent Commission on Human Security, established under the chairmanship of Sadako Ogata, former UN high commissioner for refugees, and Nobel economist Amartya Sen, produced its report *Human Security Now* with the aim of operationalising the approach. It argued for human security as a public good, and the necessity for states and the international community to come together to protect and empower people in vulnerable situations.

4) 2004-13: regional and global endorsement for a collective response to new threats

In 2004 the EU adopted the Human Security Doctrine for Europe that concentrated on the organisation's role in curbing conflicts outside its borders. The doctrine was drawn up in the context of trying to promote the EU's peacebuilding role, especially in order to curb migration within its borders.

In 2004 the UN Secretary General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change proposed in its report *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* the need to respond to the new threats of the 21st century by acknowledging the broadened nature and interrelatedness of security challenges.

In 2005 UN secretary general Kofi Annan, in his proposal for UN reforms in his report *In Larger Freedom*, albeit not making specific reference to the term human security, used its three components – "freedom from fear", "freedom from want" and "freedom to live in dignity" – as the report's main underlying thematic principles.

In the 2005 Summit Outcome Document of the High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly it was agreed that there would be a debate at the UN to further define human security.

In 2006 the Friends of Human Security was created at the UN, bringing together 34 member states from the global South and North, co-chaired by Japan and Mexico.

In the summer of 2008 the General Assembly organised an Informal Thematic Debate on Human Security (repeated again in 2011) that was attended by 90 member states at which a number of countries from both the global South and North presented their general views of the concept.

In 2010 the *Report of the UN Secretary General on Human Security* was released, which provided an overview of discussions and the main principles for advancing the UN's priorities. The report was followed by a Panel Discussion of the General Assembly and, in July, a resolution of the General Assembly (A/RES/64/291). The UN secretary general appointed a special advisor on human security, Yukio Takasu, the former Japanese ambassador to the UN.

In 2012, following the release of the second *Report of the Secretary General on Human Security*, which proposed a common understanding among member states, the General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/290, which included such a common understanding on human security.

In 2013, in preparation for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, UNDP administrator Helen Clark claimed that the human security approach leads to deeper analysis of the root causes and consequences of the insecurities that undermine people's lives. A number of organisations, such as the Secretariat of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, argued that because armed violence is a cause and consequence of development deficits, the concepts of peace and security should be included in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

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