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WHY NOT HUMAN SECURITY?¹ *

1. One security, many securities

We use the term "security" in many contexts, and not accidentally. Some would say that ordinary language is imperfect and ambiguous, but it works quite well, and there is a reason for almost everything in it. For instance, there are good reasons indeed for the usage of the word "security" referring to notions that appear to be very dissimilar.

Etymologically, the word "security" derives from Latin *sine cura* (without care, without preoccupation), and certainly there are many moments of our life in which we would like to act in a more carefree manner than we can normally allow ourselves. We would like not to worry about our health or the possibility of losing our job. We would prefer not to care about the additives instilled in the food we consume. It seems like a dream to walk alone anytime and anywhere without having to look suspiciously behind. We would like to have the security that we will not lack food and shelter if one day we are unable to take care of ourselves, and the security that no one will come and take away our house or our crop. Our fears definitely vary and derive from diverse sources, but they have in common our very human desire to reduce our sufferings and anxieties as much as possible. Undoubtedly, we all know that we will never see ourselves completely free from these fears, but it is equally certain that we all tend to avoid them as much as possible.

Along with the increase of the complexity of human affairs, and of our analytical capacities, human beings have felt the need of separating different domains of security when it came to putting in

place a collective action. At the same time, the study of security has become more and more specialized, having as a result the proliferation of separated subjects of study and mutually independent disciplines.

Thus, the development of the modern nation-state and a growing specialization of state bureaucracy reinforced the mutual autonomy of national and foreign policies of security. In fact, this division paved the path to the multiplication of state-governed domains of security. The result is that today we are accustomed to hear, in the academic and practical milieu, the word "security" when it is talked about or reflected upon national security, security at work, social security, ecological, economical, food security and a few others. By each of these terms, we refer to issues that generally seem so distant from each other that we frequently forget that each of these phrases share the word "security". At times, also, the discourse of specialists in a certain discipline can outright usurp the term "security" as if it belonged to them exclusively. In this way, political scientists and international relations scholars use to speak of "questions of security" to refer to the issues of national security (which is often reduced to questions related to the defense of the State). This specialization, however, is understandable if we take into account the complexity of the specific problems that security poses in each of these fields.

Nonetheless, lately a need emerged to re-connect these discourses and security strategies (which have always been related in our everyday lives and in everyday speech) in the political activities and in the academic reflection. This need is due at least to two reasons:

1. We have understood that to pursue one dimension of security in isolation can draw insecurity in others. Thus, a state that tries to preserve its national security at all costs and invests an excessive amount of funds to buy weapons

* Translated from Spanish by Mario Bezbradica

can provoke a sizeable increase of economic or health insecurity of its population. With the outcome that its citizens might feel very insecure (since they find themselves threatened by poverty, disease or crime). The fact that they can count on the most powerful army in the region would not provide much comfort in this situation.

2. Moreover, to confront unilaterally one form of insecurity might turn to be inefficient if its causal relations with other sources are not taken into account. For example, the fight against drug trafficking, armed insurgency or terrorism using exclusively military means can turn to be inefficient because economic insecurity - or insecurity of some other type - is ignored, when there may lay the explanation why farmers cultivate cocaine, or why new generations of insurgents or terrorists replace those defeated by the security forces.

For these two reasons and some others, various concepts of a broad scope have lately appeared which try to vindicate, in different degrees, this need to feel secure simultaneously when confronted with diverse threats, a need that was already encompassed, more or less imprecisely, by the everyday concept of "security".

2. Origins and justification of the concept "human security"

One example is provided by the Report of the Palme Commission, which adopted the concept of "common security", a clear antecedent of the notion of "human security". That report stressed, among other conclusions, that international security should rest on the commitment of joint survival rather than on the threat of

mutual destruction. Along with "common security", in the last few decades other concepts, also of a broad scope, were coined, such as "global security" or "sustainable security". However, the most widespread, most influential and most debated of these concepts is that of "human security". The origin of the term is uncertain and disputed, but it seems clear that the rapid spreading of the term was triggered off after its adoption by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in its *Report on Human Development 1994*, whose title was precisely *New Dimensions of Human Security*. Besides, it seems that the initial attempts to define and characterize the concept exhaustively are due to the Human Development Report Office, HDRO.

The mentioned report of 1994 claimed that the concept of security that was dominant in the last decades, a concept that understands security as security of territory against exterior aggression, as protection of national interests or in the best case as a global security against the threat of a nuclear holocaust, is too narrow. Moreover, these traditional conceptions of security are excessively centered on the security of nation-states, forgetting that the priority should be the security of people and that the search for the former can only be justified as the means for the latter.

It is not difficult to understand why the HDRO finds necessary to adopt a complex conception of security. The restrictive interpretations of security have had some undesirable consequences such as the subordination of the security of people to that of the State, expressed in the ancient Latin dictum: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* ("it is sweet and dignified to die for the homeland"). Moreover, the defense of State's security historically was often reduced to military defense, which has promoted militarism, in greater or lesser degree, with all of its disadvantages. Finally, the military search for State's security traditionally detracted enormous economic and human resources, to the detriment of many

other goods that are necessary for the complete security of people: education, health services, disaster prevention, etc.

The new concept of "human security", instead, means a change of stress: it is not a matter of defending territory as much as it is to safeguard the security of people in every dimension. Moreover, the UNDP proposes that the fundamental instrument for this cannot be weapons or armies, but a human sustainable development. Several bodies and agencies of the United Nations system rapidly adopted such appeal to focus security more on people and less on the nation-states. This statement also applies to Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who, in his "Millennium Report", talks about the need of an approach to security more centered on human beings.

Besides being centered on human beings, human security constitutes a conception of security that seeks to prevent the risks rather than to act *a posteriori*, and holds that the different sources of our insecurity are often related. These sources of insecurity are, on the other hand, very diverse, what obliges to consider the human security as a multidimensional concept with numerous components. Thus, the 1994 UNDP Report enumerates, at least, the following:

- Economic security
- Food security
- Health security
- Environmental security
- Personal security
- Community security
- Political security

According to UNDP, the human security includes two principal aspects:

1. Safety from chronic threats such as disease and repression
2. Protection from specific crisis of various types

In relation to this second aspect, the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, one of the most outstanding defenders of the concept, raises an interesting point. According to him, when a situation ameliorates from the economic point of view, everybody often lives better, but when the scenario deteriorates one gets a more precise measure of human inequality, because the negative situation affects in very different degrees the lives of different groups of people.² On the other hand, Ulrich Beck (1997) pointed out that the inequality in contemporary societies is more and more a matter of inequality in the distribution of risks. Thus, there is a need for any society to reduce the vulnerability of its weakest members concerning adversities of any type (economical, environmental, health, food crisis, etc.)

In May, 1999, a Conference of ministers was held in Lysøen (Norway) at the request of the governments of Canada and Norway. In this conference, human security was defined as "freedom from pervasive threats to people's rights, their safety or even their lives." In addition, it is affirmed: "Safety is the hallmark of freedom from fear, while well-being is the target of freedom from want. Human security and human development are thus two sides of the same coin, mutually reinforcing and leading to a conducive environment for each other."³ In this way, the Conference insisted on an idea that was already been present in the 1994 UNDP Report: the idea that human security and human development, although different concepts, are tightly related.

In January, 2001, a Commission on Human Security was created after an initiative of the Japanese government. This commission worked for two years on the elaboration of the Human Security Report, which was presented in May, 2003. In this report (p. 4), human security is defined in these terms:

To protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhances human freedoms and human fulfillment. Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms - freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.⁴

Furthermore, this report insists in conceiving human security as a protection from any kind of threats, what allows understanding it in terms of the exercise of the freedom to act without illegitimate restrictions. The report insists also upon the need to train and "empower" individuals and groups.

As far as the institutional support is concerned, it is interesting to point out that besides UNDP, numerous NGOs have accepted this concept, whereas some countries (which, like Canada and Japan, is appropriate to characterize as "intermediate powers") have adopted it as a central theoretical concept of their foreign policies. Moreover, a relatively numerous group of states have entered the "Human Security Network". The UN, on the other hand, has found this concept to be a useful tool in order to link and coordinate the actions of several organizations and programs, like WHO, UNDP, etc. Finally, the heterogeneous forces assembled around the concept of "human security" have achieved some important, practical goals, such as a considerably effective treaty on landmines.⁵

3. Criticism of the concept of "human security"

Nonetheless, the concept of human security has received some criticism. Perhaps the most repeated complaint is that the concept

is broad and vague. Moreover, as Roland Paris (2001) pointed out, it will be difficult to make the concept more precise. The reason is that one of the strengths of the concept of human security consists in creating a broad coalition of social movements, governments, NGOs and international bodies with diverse strategies and goals; and some of these partners, Paris points out, could leave the coalition if the concept becomes more precise in one way or another. In addition, if the concept continues to be deliberately broad and vague there is the risk that it might be reduced to a useful slogan for social mobilization, making difficult its application to academic research or to the elaboration of real policies.⁶

Another danger, pointed out by some critics, is the possible use of this term to justify actions that would be rather an extension of the traditional agenda of political realism than a genuinely alternative approach to security. Once again, the ambiguity of the term "human security" would favor these abuses to the initial idea. Thus, as we have seen, while the Human Development Report Office tends to perceive human security as a natural continuation of the human development discourse, the same concept has sometimes served for quite different purposes of some governments that form part of the colorful coalition for human security. For example, the government of Canada tried to justify the NATO bombardments on Kosovo (previously advocated, without success, by the Canadian government before the Security Council, whose member it was at that time) invoking the notion of human security. This line of argumentation is clearly present in Paul Heinbecker, a high official of the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Heinbecker (1999) argues that the NATO war against Serbia was a war for human security. Moreover, he justifies the decision of his government when, after failing to persuade the Security Council to approve the attacks on Kosovo and Serbia, decided to proceed with the attacks anyway, alongside with other member states of

NATO. For sure, those who first coined the term "human security" could not envision its use in such fallacious argumentations. In this way, the concept of human security could end up fulfilling quite different, even opposite roles to those initially conceived: from proposing an alternative conception of security, based on human development, to justifying new variants of political realism, and particularly, great powers' armed interventions outside their borders.

Nevertheless, some have noticed these abuses. Woodward (1999), for instance, points out that the NATO military campaign did not improve human security in Kosovo. Texts as this one show that the concept, in spite of its ambiguity, rebels against those usages that overtly tow it away from the initial framework.

To sum up, there is a widespread complaint concerning the scarce precision of the concept of human security. According to critics, the concept, because of this ambiguity, could become either:

- 1) A purely redundant concept that, precisely because of its historical and definitional links to those of human development and human rights, would not add much to them and would serve only to create more confusion in fields already burdened by tedious theoretical debates.⁷
- 2) A mere mobilizing slogan, without precise definition, to which resort to when there is an interest in forming coalitions of groups that are heterogeneous in identity and convictions (NGOs, governments, international organizations...).
- 3) A dulcified version of the old concepts of security tied to political realism, with the aggravating factor that the globalist identity of human security would serve to justify military interventions unilaterally decided by great powers such as the United States, or powerful alliances such as NATO.

- 4) A term defined and used by the Western elites to impose their own conceptions of the world order to those who are excluded from the construction process of this concept (countries and cultures of the Third World, women, minorities...).

If one takes into account these objections, it does not seem surprising that some critics propose, in some cases, the abandonment of the concept; and in other cases, its delimitation in order to attribute to it a more precise, though less ambitious, use. For example, Paris (2001) proposes the attribution of a merely taxonomic role to the term "human security".

3. Give the concept a chance

Now, is it possible to aspire to more ambitious and legitimate uses of the concept of human security, uses that comply more with the aspirations of those who initially coined it? In the remaining part of this paper I will attempt to argue in favour of this possibility.

We can recognize that the concept is very broad and is under construction. One could say, however, the same of the concepts of human rights and human development, whose practical and theoretical effectiveness are widely accepted. These concepts, like that of human security, have not been waiting to be discovered either in the (natural or social) world or in some kind of Platonic heaven. These concepts have been constructed along with the human history. It is also true that this construction is not equivalent to *creatio ex nihilo*. Even though the content of the concepts of security, human rights or development is something to agree about (and, in fact, something that was historically agreed to, at least to some extent), it is also true that human condition, what we are and the circumstances that surround us, impose some limits on the con-

struction of the concept. In particular, human beings share, as members of the species, certain basic needs, although it is necessary to recognize two assertions: firstly, it turns out to be very difficult for us to agree upon the exact list of the basic needs; secondly, these needs are satisfied in ways that vary enormously according to different epochs and cultures. Moreover, human beings share many fears (of hunger, of physical harm, of psychological peril...), some of them tied directly to deficient satisfaction of those basic needs, although every culture and every individual trace and approach these fears in different ways, and add to the list their own.⁸ Correspondingly, human beings share a certain aspiration to security with certain common traits, although other components are cultural or idiosyncratic.

At a certain historical moment (well into the twentieth century), some consensus was reached around the need to discuss human rights and write down a Declaration (more universal in its intended reach than in the real unanimous support from all societies and all cultures) stating which are these rights. Certainly, what we are as human beings would not be compatible with any list; but no one can deny that the list could have been somewhat different to the one actually adopted, among other reasons because those who agreed on it had different conceptions about what we are as human beings. And, indeed, the conviction that the list could have been different was confirmed when, some time later, several rights were added (the rights of the second and the third generation, as they are called) in the context of a long debate that still goes on.

The fact that the term "human rights" has, in its collective use, a largely undetermined meaning does not imply that every person that uses it has a vague or confused understanding of what human rights are. Two persons might give perfectly precise definitions of human rights and not agreeing, for example, on whether rights should be attributed to groups or only to individuals, because their

definitions are different. The problem does not come from a lack of precision, but from disagreement. It is not the case that someone needs to learn the only definition of "human rights"; the case is rather that, given that the term expresses a constructed concept, everyone has the right to propose his or her own definition (although not *any* definition). Anyhow, despite of these difficulties, few people today would propose to drop the discourse on human rights, and few people would fail to recognize that this concept has been useful in order to provide foundations for laws, to criticize abuses or to build alliances against authoritarianism, injustice and discrimination.

The critics of the concept of human security mix often two different issues: that of precision and that of unanimity. Therefore, it is not surprising that some point out that the concept is not precise, that it is ambiguous, because there is no unanimity in the definition. However, unanimity in the definition will probably never emerge, just as it will probably never be reached around the definition of the terms "human rights" or "human development". For the reason that the concepts to which we refer to by means of these terms are, as I have indicated, constructed concepts and it is legitimate that diverse theoretical foci construct them in different ways.

The existence of discrepancies concerning the definition of a certain term, however, does not absolve the advocates of such a definition of the responsibility to make the concept - human security, human rights or whatever - as precise and operational as possible. Anybody, therefore, will have the right to criticize the academic users of the concept of human security if they do not explain clearly the meaning of the term, if they do not specify how to measure the levels of human security in a given context, and which precise actions to adopt in order to increase these levels. In this sense, it would be useful to propose indexes of human security that would

make this concept operational, just as the Human Development Index has made operational the concept of human development.⁹

Now, what to say about the uses of the term as a mobilizing slogan? It is not surprising that those who use the term "human security" to unite their wills in a specific campaign (against landmines or against the security policy of a state) are not in the position to specify a more precise definition. Since their goals are not academic and it is not their business to devise, in the manner of officials of a government or international agency, a program of measures. What they need to do is to convoke a coalition, as broad as possible, around the common components of the respective definitions of human security. The coalitions will vary depending of the aim of the campaign, and so can vary, therefore, the common components. However, such circumstances should not cast doubt on the legitimacy and usefulness of these mobilizations, just as it would be out of place to question the legitimacy and usefulness of the mobilizations for human rights simply because the participants in each of these do not share a unique conception of the precise meaning of the term "human rights".

To sum up, it would be too much to ask for a definition of human security that at the same time:

1. is precise
2. is unanimously accepted by academics and political actors
3. provides us with the decision algorithm when it comes to deciding what to do in order to improve the levels of human security in a specific context
4. is capable of unifying the efforts of diverse groups and mobilize them.

The demand for precision must be lessened when it comes to setting out on the task number 4 and it would be incompatible with the claim number 2. Precision, nevertheless, is naturally required

in the contexts of academic research and design of policies and in such contexts it is foreseeable and legitimate that the search for precision will produce disagreements. As for the claim number 3, it will not be realizable generally, especially when task number 2 is not accomplished, so it is better to forget about it. At most, one could expect that the concept of human security provide us with a starting point to discuss security policies.

If a concept of human security answering to the above-mentioned demands is not realizable, how can we evaluate the usefulness of an alternative concept? Two criteria should be used:

1. its potential for political mobilization
2. its theoretic usefulness to analyze real states of affairs and to propose alternative courses of action

As far as the mobilizing capacity is concerned, the critics of the concept do not generally deny it. In fact, the general criticism is usually that the term, because of its ambiguity, is only useful to generate broad coalitions on issues such as the fight against landmines, but due precisely to this ambiguity, cannot fulfill other tasks requiring more precision.¹⁰ We, therefore, can take it for granted that the concept meets the first criterion reasonably well and we can hope that it will keep doing so in the future, if a sufficient number of organizations and states accept it and the academic community devotes more effort to make it useful and credible than to stigmatize it.

As far as the second criterion is concerned, it is clear that once we give up complete unanimity the most we can assess, regarding the theoretic uses of the term, is the fruitfulness of each particular conception of human security and its applicability to the analysis of particular cases and to the proposal of measures promoting security. At this point, one could argue: if we allow such a plurality, why not use different terms in each case instead of talking in all

of the cases, equivocally, about "human security". For two reasons, at least:

1) Firstly, because those who debate on the characterization and scope of human security usually agree on a great deal of the components that should be included in the definition of human security, perceive their disagreements as disagreements on the same concept and tend to reduce these disagreements by means of discussion and persuasion.

2) Secondly, it is convenient to keep the same term because of the mobilizing capacity of the concept. In this way, those using it in political action will benefit from various theoretic contributions developed by academics, even when these do not agree completely among themselves.

5. The concept in action

The actions of governments, of numerous NGOs and social movements, of organizations such as WHO, UNDP or UNHCR are promoting already, in fact, human security, although in an unsatisfactory and fragmentary manner. We need, however, a concept that is able to articulate these actions and make them coherent; a concept that cannot be imposed, but constructed taking into account different traditions of thinking as well as different cultures. A concept that can serve as a tool for the criticism of those policies that, although presented as promoters of security, produce more insecurity than security, policies that can be portrayed, consequently, as pathologies of security.

It is not right to assert, as some have done, that the concept of "human security" is compatible with virtually any particular security policy. In spite of the openness of the concept, it is not true that it can be extended to accommodate any security policy without

being distorted.¹¹ It is open to discussion whether the concept will exclude many or few security policies, but the concept would preserve its interest if it happens to be incompatible with some visions of security that are predominant, in fact, in the academic circles and, in particular, in international politics. I will illustrate this assertion with a few examples.

The concept of human security provides us with a good set of arguments against the security policy of the current U.S. Administration. Among the components of such policy we can recall its unilateralism, its resistance to accept the jurisdiction of organizations such as the International Criminal Court, its reliance on military technology and war as the main answers to terrorism, its refusal to become part of international environmental agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, and its permissiveness in the production and sale of weapons. Now, such a set of political options can be seen as pathology of *security*. This means that these policies are sacrificing the fundamental components of our security to promote, with a questionable success, exclusively one aspect of security.

The concept, also, allows us to criticize the NATO bombardments on the former Yugoslavia because that strategy did not have as a principal goal the protection of the civilian population, regardless of the national or ethnic affiliation of the population, and it certainly did not achieve that goal, either in the short or the long term.

Finally, the concept of human security provides several arguments against fundamental aspects of the security policy of the president Álvaro Uribe Vélez and previous Colombian administrations, as laid out by Henry Salgado Ruiz (2004).¹²

Examples as these illustrate that the concept of human security can be useful to criticize current security policies and to develop alternative proposals for particular situations. I believe, therefore,

that we ought to give the concept a chance, as we once did with "human rights" or "human development".

Notes

1 This chapter is a shorter and freer version of two previous papers. The first is "La noción de seguridad humana: sus virtudes y sus peligros" published in the Journal Polis (Chile), nº 11 (2004). The other is "Seguridad humana: dadle una oportunidad al concepto" in F. Cante et al. (2005) *Acción política no-violenta, una opción para Colombia*, pp. 237-260. Bogotá, Centro Editorial Universidad del Rosario. I wish to thank the support of the Spanish Ministry of Education through the projects HUM2005-07168/FISO, HUM2006-12284/FISO, and HUM2005-06760.

2 See the interview with Amartya Sen in the journal *Soka Gakkai Internacional*, nº 33. <http://www.sgi.org/spanish/inicio/quarterly/33/TemaPrincipal1.html>

3 "A Perspective on Human Security": Chairman's Summary of the 1st Ministerial Meeting of the Human Security Network, Lysøen, Norway, May 20 1999. <http://www.humansecuritynetwork.org/>

4 <http://www.humansecurity-chs.org/finalreport/index.html>. The government of Canada supported a somewhat narrower definition: the freedom from threats concerning rights, security and lives of human beings (cfr. Paris, 2001, p. 90). More on the Canadian agenda in foreign policy, articulated around the concept of human security, can be found in McRae y Hubert (eds.) (2001); Heinbecker (2000).

5 See Paris (2001).

6 Similar criticism in relation to the lack of clarity and precision of the concept of human security can be found in Van Ginkel and Newman (2000), and in Stoett (1999).

7 See Edson (2001).

8 See THOMSON (1987); MAX-NEEF, ELIZALDE and HOPENHAYN (1998).

9 An interesting contribution along this line is Bajpai (2000)

10 See Paris (2001).

11 I have mentioned above the intention to use the concept of human security to justify NATO intervention in Kosovo. Some of us think that this would be an example of an abuse of the concept.

12 Other examples of uses of the concept of human security to analyze regional situations can be found in Thomas and Wilkin (1999) for Africa and in Matsumae and Chen (eds.) (1995) for the case of Asia.

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