EU-GRASP Policy Brief

Human Security?
The Weaknesses of the EU's Involvement in Human Rights Crises

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Executive Summary

Humanitarian intervention is always controversial, especially if it involves the use of repressive measures, be it through military means or sanctions. The human security approach undoubtedly provides an interesting blueprint for the EU to improve coherence in its external action, as it is better suited to translate the Union's founding principles (and its inherent emphasis on non-military conflict resolution) into a policy practice. At the same time, though, political considerations remain relevant as demonstrated by the analysis of the EU's involvement in four human rights crises (Darfur, Zimbabwe, Gaza and Lebanon). In order to strengthen its credibility and consistency as a humanitarian actor, the EU should prioritize the protection of civilians, avoid double standards at all costs, and prioritize genuine multilateralism, which requires a real involvement of all parties. In this regard, therefore, the EU should refrain from posing 'take it or leave it' conditions and recognize that real multilateralism might well lead to non-optimal outcomes for the EU's interests.

Introduction

Human rights are at the core of the European integration process (which was built on the ashes of civil war and genocide) and its long-term aspirations. Invariably, therefore, the foundational recognition of human rights also reverberates in the EU's foreign policy and external relations.

While human rights have long been promoted as a value in their own right, the evolution of global politics has increasingly shown that human rights abuses can also become 'international security' issues and threaten the stability of the international system. For instance, terrorism can be fuelled by human rights violations. Migration flows are exasperated by refugees fleeing abusive governments. Failed states incapable of defending their own citizens can easily trigger civil wars and destabilize entire regions, with spill-over effects onto the global arena.

Thus, in the continuously evolving jargon of international politics, human rights have come to be gradually 'securitized', that is, interpreted and operationalized in terms of security concerns and the EU has been no exception to this trend. Obviously, the risk involved with the securitization of human rights is that the issue is often addressed with strategic (read: military) means, while other types of responses may be more appropriate. Intervention, whether portrayed as humanitarian or not, is always a double-edged word: indeed, military operations can further exasperate the human rights abuses they aim to address. In this regard, the EU has been trying to adopt a more flexible and comprehensive approach to the problem

of human rights violations as security threats, mainly through the concept of 'human security'. Such a focus would help promote the 'primacy of human rights' as a cornerstone of all humanitarian interventions: not only calling for the respect of civilian rights in conflict zones, but also, and most importantly, for the adoption of human rights as the driving principles of all interventions.

In this vein, non-violent initiatives and other diplomatic means should be given primacy over any other effort. So, while the traditional military goal is to end a war or remove an abusive government (often also at the expenses of protecting the rights of civilians), the human security focus calls for a completely different approach: the goal becomes the protection of civilians, the promotion of their rights and the preference for non-violent means of confrontation. At a macro-level, a human security intervention should, whenever possible, be conducted within a multilateral framework.

This Policy Brief provides an overall of the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's involvement (or lack thereof) in four major cases of gross human rights violations: the crisis between Israel and Gaza in 2008, the 2006 Lebanon War, the Darfur crisis in Sudan from 2003 to 2010, and the Zimbabwean crisis from 2001 to 2010. The findings outlined here are drawn from extensive studies based on systematic content analyses of official documents, press releases, newspaper articles and interviews.

To intervene or not to intervene? Dilemmas of EU's humanitarian action

Intervention in human rights crises has always been a headache in international politics. Not only does it imply significant resources and risks for the international community, but it also raises legitimate questions as to its actual impacts. Thus, in the absence of commonly agreed rule of engagement, the practice of intervention has been dominated by a good degree of improvisation. The EU, just like most other international actors, has been no exception.

In Lebanon and Gaza, where the skirmishes with Israel have caused two major humanitarian crises in 2006 and 2008-9 respectively, the EU has by and large been a bystander, limiting itself to issuing a number of generic declarations and focusing much of its energy on providing humanitarian aid. In Zimbabwe, by contrast, the EU has been quite vociferous and has swiftly introduced an arms embargo as well as targeted sanctions against top officials within government and security forces. In Sudan, the EU took an even bigger role by strengthening sanctions with the support for a military mission led by the African Union (AMIS and AMIS II) and, in 2009, by directly intervening with an ESDP military mission along the borders between Sudan and Chad/Central African Republic.

The scope and scale of European interventions were dictated not only by considerations about actual capabilities, but also by political interests within the EU. The military intervention in Chad/Central African Republic was supported (and largely manned) by the French government in order to support these countries' response to the refugee crisis in Darfur and, also, to prevent the conflict from spreading to neighbouring countries. The sanctions against Zimbabwe were initially supported by the British government as a response to the land grabbing policies introduced by the Zimbabwean government against white farmers, most of which are of British descent. In both cases, colonial ties also played an important role.

During the Lebanon war and the conflict in the Gaza Strip, numerous divisions emerged within the EU, thereby stifling a unitary approach or a more resolute condemnation of the human rights violations. No clear leading proposal emerged, let alone a country willing to take the lead. The EU's intervention was more limited also because of political sensitivities, mainly concerning the involvement (in both cases as an offender) of Israel. In the end, European authorities limited their action to providing aid policies and humanitarian relief, thereby refraining from taking a bolder political stance.

Multilateral cooperation? Lights and shadows

An important component of the human security approach is the multilateral nature of the intervention. In this case, too, Europe's performance has been characterized by lights and shadows. During the Lebanon war, EU countries and institutions elaborated common policies at various international meetings, most notably the G8 summit held in Saint

Petersburg and the International Conference on Lebanon of 2006, and supported the ratification of the UNSC Resolution 1701, besides contributing to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. In Darfur/Sudan, the EU collaborated quite closely with the AU and encouraged the International Criminal Court (ICC) to indict the Sudanese president Bashir for crimes against humanity. On the contrary, in Zimbabwe the EU was not able to stimulate an effective multilateral process, mainly due to its inability to interact with the Southern African Development Community. Finally, in Gaza, the multilateral context was fundamentally flawed, given that one of the parties to the conflict (Hamas) was systematically excluded from the international talks. Moreover, the EU acted half-heartedly throughout the conflict and did not play a particularly significant role in collaboration or opposition to other international actors.

It must also be noted that the EU's multilateral strategy did not necessarily achieve its intended effects. A case in point is constituted by the involvement of the ICC in the Darfur crisis, which spurred a wave of criticisms by African countries and drove a wedge between the EU and, to a certain extent, the African Union, whose members have refused to collaborate with the UN-backed multilateral institution.

Framing the crises: human security focus

In all crisis scenarios, the EU discourse was framed by a number of underlying elements. In the case of Darfur, for instance, 'justice' was by and large the most prominent component of the EU discourse, centred on the need to identify culprits of human rights violations and fight the culture of 'impunity' marring many African countries. In Zimbabwe, the EU's declarations revolved the breach of the 'rule of law and the fundamental democratic principles' perpetrated by the Mugabe government, which triggered a vast array of targeted sanctions against top officials and politicians. In both crises, the human security lens was quite strong. In Darfur, the EU condemned the 'attacks on civilians', the 'atrocities' committed by the paramilitary forces and the army (which were equated to an actual 'genocide'), and continuously stressed the importance to protect 'vulnerable groups', especially women and children. In Zimbabwe, the human security discourse touched upon concrete issues such as 'food security' and 'the economic and social needs of the population', but also on a more conceptual (and densely political) dimension such as 'the responsibility to protect', which, according to the EU, the Zimbabwean government had failed to fulfil or directly violated.

On the contrary, it appears that in the case of Gaza and Lebanon, the human security focus – although present – was much more generic. In Lebanon, the EU often referred to the risk that the conflict could trigger a profound 'economic crisis' and even an 'environmental catastrophe', while in the case of Gaza the focus was on the 'suffering of the local population'. In terms of actionable proposals, the EU limited its discourse to proposing some forms of 'civilian conflict management' in Lebanon, while its declarations during the Gaza conflict simply demanded to 'cease

hostilities' by both parties.

Attributing responsibility: double standards?

Human rights crises do not simply happen. They are caused and perpetrated by human beings. Therefore, the attribution of responsibility is fundamental to guarantee human security also in the long run. Our studies reveal that the EU was much resolute at identifying responsibilities in Sudan and Zimbabwe than it was in Lebanon and Gaza. Ever since the breakout of the humanitarian crises in Darfur and Zimbabwe, the EU immediately identified the Bashir and Mugabe governments as the driving forces behind the two humanitarian crises. This clear stance, of course, made the EU's official response more coherent (at least in terms of policy procedures), but also triggered counter-reactions in the respective regions. By contrast, in the case of Lebanon and Gaza, the EU rhetoric is much less assertive with respect to the causation of human rights abuses, thus limiting itself to a mere recognition of the humanitarian consequences of the conflict. Official declarations were rather generic, calling for bilateral ceasefires and failing to identify clear responsibilities for human suffering. Our analysis of the Gaza conflict also points out the limits of a humanitarian discourse that fails to recognize the special status of Gazans (citizens without a state), whose human rights are not simply abused by the state of occupation operated by Israeli forces but also by the absence of an institutional state capable to deliver services to its citizens and fully recognized by the international community.

In spite of differences and contradictions, the EU's discourse appears to have been coherent at least in so far as it has lived up to the 'people first' principle underlying the human security doctrine (with the case of Gaza as a partial exception). However, when it comes not only to the instruments and policies adopted but also the capacity to criticize and possibly retaliate against human rights abusers, the double standard syndrome that has long afflicted the EU's foreign policy and more mundane *realpolitik* concerns come to the surface, invariably limiting the credibility of the Union as a genuine defender of human rights.

Policy recommendations

Humanitarian intervention is always controversial, especially if it involves the use of repressive measures, be it through military means or sanctions. The human security approach undoubtedly provides an interesting blueprint for the EU to improve coherence in its external action, as it is better suited to translate the Union's founding principles (and its inherent emphasis on non-military conflict resolution) into a policy practice. At the same time, though, there is no 'one size fits all approach' and EU will not be able to circumvent important political considerations when developing its responses to human rights crises, given that in contemporary global affairs all actions may elicit unexpected counter-actions and eventually lead to undesired outcomes. Based on the four cases discussed in this Policy Brief, the EU should:

- Prioritize the protection of civilians, even when doing so may be against the Union's short-term political and economic interests.

- Not refrain from taking a clear diplomatic stance, which is a fundamental pre-condition of international credibility. Obviously, this may lead to frictions with the other parties involved and, therefore, it will require a good degree of flexibility and leveraging.

- Avoid double standards at all costs, given that this has been a traditional factor in weakening the credibility of the EU as a humanitarian actor, also in Africa where Europe has traditionally played a leading role.

- Prioritize genuine multilateralism, which requires a real involvement of all parties. The EU should, therefore, refrain from a) unilaterally excluding unwelcome parties and b) posing 'take it or leave it' conditions. It should also recognize that real multilateralism might well lead to non-optimal outcomes for the EU's interests.

Conclusion

Although the notion of human security provides important guidelines for the EU's humanitarian action, the analysis of four key human rights crises (Darfur, Zimbabwe, Gaza and Lebanon) reveals that there is no 'one size fits all approach' and EU will not be able to circumvent important political considerations each time. In order to strengthen its 'voice' and credibility, the EU should avoid double standards and prioritize genuine multilateralism, which requires a real involvement of all parties. At the same time, the EU should not refrain from taking a clear diplomatic stance, while avoiding to pose 'take it or leave it' conditions and exclude 'unwelcome' parties for the negotiating table. It should also recognize that real multilateralism might well lead to non-optimal outcomes for the EU's interests.