



# **The Social Construction of Human Security**

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## Abstract

While the world is deeply changing, new metaphors, concepts and ideas arise which are to some extent related to those changes. Such new concepts are introduced as attempts to define and capture these ongoing changes. On the one hand, there is a (changing) social reality while, on the other hand, there are metaphors, concepts, ideas, models or theories used to explain that reality. However, this positivist perspective is challenged by social constructionists, who claim that concepts also have to be regarded as discursive tools. In other words, attempts to explain social reality are, at the same time, active players in constructing the social reality. Consequently, it is important to examine the reasons behind the use of a certain concept. This paper argues that 'human security' is one of those concepts used to construct today's social reality. It will try to demonstrate that the concept of human security, besides its fundamental content-related importance, also represents a tool used by certain actors to challenge the Westphalian world order and its related security paradigm.

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# The Social Construction of Human Security

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As the world changes, new concepts and metaphors arise that are related to those changes. Often such new ideas are presented as being an attempt to capture the ongoing changes. Behind this lies the assumption that on the one hand, there is a (changing) social reality while on the other hand, there are concepts, metaphors, models or theories that can be used to explain that reality. But this positivist point of view is challenged by social constructionists, who claim that concepts also have to be regarded as discursive *tools* that people use in performing certain practices (see for instance Searle 1995; Potter 1996; Rothbart 2004). In other words, attempts to explain social reality are at the same time actually playing a role in constructing the social reality. Seen from this perspective, concepts and models are, in fact, rhetorical devices. Consequently, it is important to examine the reasons why, by whom and when a certain concept is used.

This paper argues that 'human security' is one of those concepts that certain actors use to construct today's social reality. Section one presents an analysis of the concept, focusing upon the definitions attributed to it. Section two presents changes in multilateralism that given rise to opportunities to talk about human security. The final section advocates a 'discursive turn' in the study of human security.

## Conceptualising Human Security<sup>1</sup>

Human security is a novel concept, but few other ideas were accepted so quickly and with so much enthusiasm by policy makers and academia alike. It is an idea, which is repeatedly invoked in political debates, advocated in a multitude of security policy documents, and used by a range of

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based upon Van Langenhove et al (2009).

development and security actors. But what is human security? What do we still need to know about it?

In a narrow sense, human security is about creating a new central reference point for security – the individual. This approach can be traced back to the 1993 Human Development Report, which triggered debate on the need to challenge entrenched views on security, changing it from an exclusive stress on national security to a focus on the security of the individual and of people; from security through armaments to security through human development; and from territorial security to food, environmental and employment security. Therefore, previous conceptions of the term have been deeply called into question. It became evident that the traditional conception of security – based upon military defence of territory – was a necessary but indeed not sufficient condition for people’s security and welfare. The 1994 edition of the Human Development Report, championed by Mahbub ul Haq, elevated the discussion to a level of doctrine.

The reasons for adopting the term ‘human security’ were to bridge freedom from fear, (and thus also freedom from violence) and freedom from want, (related to poverty alleviation). It thus included economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security. As such, human security reflects the concern that security must focus upon individuals or people collectively, wherever the threat comes from and whatever the nature of this threat. Therefore, human security is a transversal concept that affects every sector that can impact upon people’s welfare, and that requires the adoption of cross-sectoral policies to respond to a range of human security vulnerabilities in societies. The focus on the individual presupposed that security policies should be shaped by the needs of people and their perceived or real threats. As described in the 1994 UNDP Report, “human 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” (UNDP 1994: 22).

In the UNDP 1994 Human Development Report, the core components of human security - understood as freedom from fear and freedom from want – are defined as: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security.

The weight given by an individual or group to each of these elements is likely to be affected by a number of different factors, such as ethnicity, age, gender, time, geography, political regime, economic situation and culture.

Ethnicity represents both an important variable in the perception of vulnerabilities and a major risk factor in the generation of violence itself. In approaching the components of human security, the ethnic perspective gives primacy to community-level security because this encompasses the physical protection of the ethnic group. Those other elements that the definition of human security encompasses are relevant to the extent that access to them can be jeopardised by discrimination based on ethnicity. People belonging to different ethnic groups are unlikely to attribute the same weight to the various components of human security.

Differences in age heavily influence perceptions of vulnerability in human security, without being linked to violence as such. A young person is likely to be primarily concerned about employment, job security, peer violence, environment and education, whilst elderly people will be concerned about the ability of the state to respond to their needs, their access to social services and the purchasing power of their pensions.

Gender constitutes a complex variable in perceptions of human security. In particular, it can be a major factor in increasing the risk of violence, notably in conflict situations. Gender potentially affects perspectives on all seven components of human security, since economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political securities are fundamental to women in reducing their vulnerability. Many women suffer both individual and societal discrimination in all or some of these domains. Generally, women have less control over resources, a factor which makes them particularly vulnerable and constantly exposed to the risk of discrimination.

Time affects perceptions of human security vulnerabilities in that it attributes different levels of importance to risks depending on historical periods or on the social or cultural trends that dominate particular decades or centuries. What is now perceived as a threat or a risk may not even have been considered a potential source of vulnerability a century or even decades ago.

Geography affects the analysis of human security because perceptions of vulnerability are affected by the location of individuals, countries or continents. The geographical perspective puts primacy on the environmental dimension of human security, but is also sensitive to economic, food and personal security dimensions of vulnerability. In reality, a population with less access to resources as a consequence of its surrounding geography, is likely to have an underdeveloped economy, restricted food availability and greater exposure to natural disasters, all of which threaten its security.

Political regimes, as with ethnicity and geography, constitute both a variable in the perception of human security vulnerabilities and a potential cause in generating violence itself. Differences in the political regime can affect all seven components of human security, due to the fact that most of the vulnerabilities facing individuals and communities, be they economic, social, environmental or personal, depend upon the political system. People living under an authoritarian regime naturally perceive their vulnerability in a different way to those living within a democratic system. Political regimes can also be catalysts for violence if interstate conflicts explode as a result of expansionist policies of the leadership.

The economic situation of a person or country naturally affects all elements of human security, since economic vulnerabilities can have repercussions on the security of food, health, environment, communities, the political system and individuals. A rich country will almost inevitably be less vulnerable to a lack of food, inadequate health provision, environmental catastrophes, physical violence or political instability. A poor country, on the other hand, is much more affected by all these vulnerabilities and is also more exposed to the risk that it can be weakened by problems deriving from rich countries, upon which it depends for its economy or political support. The same applies to groups and individuals within the same country since prosperity levels and individual capacities vary greatly, thus giving place to different levels of resilience and ability to respond to human security threats.

As with ethnicity, culture affects the perception of human security components, whilst cultural intolerance can act as a potential catalyst in triggering violence. From a cultural perspective, the most important element in human security is community security because of its emphasis on traditions, values and ethnic links. As with ethnicity, a cultural approach to the other six human security characteristics focuses mainly on the risk of cultural discrimination preventing access to the economy, food, health, environment and political life. People from different cultures are likely to have divergent priorities within their human security perspective. Identity, religion, traditional values and social systems strongly influence the identification of risks for individuals. Especially during the last decades, religion has become influential in shaping perceptions of threats and vulnerabilities. This suggests that culture represents one of the elements deeply influenced by time.

As the discussion above indicates, ethnicity, age, gender, time, geography, political regime, economic situation and culture, all contribute to an individual's sense of security or insecurity. Human security at its core is built on people's perceptions, which are themselves embedded in individuals' cultural background. This means that there can be different perceptions of security



even within the same community and in circumstances where theoretically at least, people should share similar feelings of insecurity. At the same time, common perceptions of security may develop across people living in different continents if they share a core set of common human security characteristics. In terms of a shared perception of relative vulnerabilities, it is thus possible to conceptualise human security from both a horizontal and a vertical perspective.

Worldwide, people experience 'unfreedoms', namely obstacles and insecurities that prevent them from achieving their aspirations to live a life of dignity, enjoying greater freedom: free from want and free from fear, and ensuring the freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment. This legitimate aspiration implies that a whole series of governance institutions, starting with the state and moving across the whole spectrum, from municipalities up to international organisations, including regional and sub-national layers of governance processes - work towards the creation and maintenance of an environment conducive to the fulfilment of such an aspiration. This shift away from an exclusively state-based conception of collective security to a people- and community-centred definition enables security to be understood as the sum of individual and community concerns and a possible positive-sum game, in which all actors can attain greater security (Jolly & Ray 2006: 12).

As noted earlier, human security is rarely solely about protection from violence, and security is always more than just freedom from fear. Crises and other extreme scenarios, conflicts and social upheaval may focus people's security concerns on violence. More often than not, however, the primary threats to the lives of millions of people living in developing countries are related to the 'supply side' of societal systems, and involve socioeconomic risks: security of employment and income, the access of individuals to health care and education systems, or the promotion and guarantee of their basic human rights.

The importance of human security also derives from its relation with governance. It is governance that sets the system of values, policies and institutions by which a society manages its economic, political and social affairs, both through interactions within the state and interactions between the state, civil society and the private sector. Governance is the way a society organises itself to make and implement decisions through mutual understanding, agreement and action. It comprises the mechanisms and processes for citizens and groups to articulate their interests, mediate their differences and exercise their legal rights and obligations. The rules, institutions and practices set limits and provide incentives for individuals, organisations and firms. In its social, political and

economic dimensions, governance operates at every level of human enterprise, be it in the household, village, municipality, nation, region or even globally (UNDP 2002).

In principle, governments, and indeed all entities vested with governance powers, seek to secure development and security for the people they serve. Serving people means to empower them to face the challenges of life. Good governance is central to human development. It requires fostering fair, accountable institutions to protect human rights and basic freedoms (UNDP 2002: 2). Effective governance must, by definition, lead to improvements in the human development and human security status of people, enlarging the range of choices available to individuals to live the long, healthy life they value and effectively reducing risks and threats associated with human security.

Following this understanding of good governance therefore, it is evident that the performance of governance institutions (judiciary, political parties, public administration, municipalities and governments) and their attributes (representativeness, legitimacy, fairness, transparency, accountability, equity) often help to determine the nature and scope of human security in a given society. These institutions may themselves constitute major factors, which can influence human security levels positively or negatively. Indeed, some human security surveys have found that the major threats and factors of insecurity identified by the population include their own government and politicians, their lack of influence on decision-making or the absence of legitimate and impartial representation. In some surveys, respondents have identified international organisations as the best security providers for them and expressed higher levels of confidence in them than in their own national institutions.

## **Human Security in a Changing World**

States are supposed to provide security to their citizens, but often threats to human beings come from the state itself. So it is necessary to analyse how the perception of state prerogatives has influenced the promotion of human security.

The starting point is the idea of sovereignty and its emphasis on non interference in domestic affairs. This concept has developed into a norm that guarantees “state-security” for every state on the planet. But it also makes it difficult to intervene if states are a security problem for their own citizens: “Sovereignty has its costs, but its benefit was international order” (Jones et al., 2009: 10).

In the Westphalian world-order, individual sovereign states can and do co-operate when this is in line with their own national interest. Such co-operation can be bilateral or multilateral. Ever since

the emergence of the modern state, international regimes and procedures have been used by governments to regulate and control transnational and international relations (Keohane & Nye 1997: 5). Often this has led to the creation of intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). The first IGO was created in 1815: the International Commission for the Navigation of the River Rhine. The number of IGOs has been growing steadily ever since. It has been estimated that today we have more than 400 international institutions. The provision of security has been a major reason for creating such institutions. The most obvious example here is the UN and its predecessor, the League of Nations; both were founded with the aim of providing the world with a system of collective security. Another major driver has been the promotion of welfare, through joint actions in technical, economic and humanitarian affairs. Here the emphasis lies on the provision of international or global public goods, with the underlying rationale that in some instances, states can act more efficiently and provide better public goods through international co-operation. Typical examples include international air-traffic control, humanitarian welfare of refugees or the prevention of climate change.

The point to be highlighted here is that the post World War II situation has been dominated for about 50 years by a major paradox: on the one hand, change has become the very essence of our societies, but, on the other hand, the Cold War has somehow ‘frozen’ the geographical situation and made change in that area difficult, if not impossible. But today, in the post Cold War era the instability and the rapid pace of change has also become a characteristic of the geopolitical sphere. As put by Buzan and Waever, “In the present era, the story of global security becomes more diversified. A relatively uniform picture of military-political security dynamics gives way to multisectoral conceptions of security, a wider variety of actors, and sets of conditions and dynamics that differ sharply from one region to another” (2003: 19). This places considerable strain on the sovereign state.

So states play an incredibly important role in today’s world. In fact, one can justly claim that we are living in a world of states. But this world order is not stable. The genesis of the world of states – and the related idea of nationalism – is linked to specific societal developments such as urbanisation and industrialisation. When revolutionary changes in technology and culture challenged the feudal world order, the sovereign state became the single most important building block of a new world order. But, even within that world order, changes have always been part of the game. States are human constructs, formed by societal forces and by political acts. Therefore, states are not stable constructs. The present system, which is the result of a long historical process, has some inbuilt

problems, such as the differences in size and wealth between states and the difficulties in managing trans-national issues that affect state sovereignty. Each state has its own distinct history and specific historic conditions, which explain how state boundaries have been drawn. As a result, states differ from each other in terms of geographical size or economic or political power. Nevertheless, all states continue to have one thing in common – their sovereignty.

The present world order is thus one in which states play a central role both in upholding sovereign governance and as building blocks of international cooperation. This world order has reached some kind of stability in the sense that it is becoming more and more difficult to change borders in order to create bigger units. The old idea of expanding territory through war has been abandoned. At the same time the number of border disputes seems to be diminishing. So there are few indications to say that in the future the number of states will decline. Every state that now exists will probably exist for many more years.

On the other hand, the forces driving the creation of new states through the splitting up of existing ones remain powerful in some instances. Sometimes nationalism and the call of cultural autonomy push for the creation of new states. In other circumstances, the problems related to governing large territories in a centralised way will also push towards devolution. Although the existing states do not favour the creation of new states, the trend of new states being created is likely to continue. As a result, the total number of states on the planet will continue to increase. But meanwhile, different forces favouring the creation of bigger entities of governance continue to act. Markets always try to expand and hence firms, organised in national economies, will look for ways to do business outside the national 'hinterland'. And small states will try to increase their voice by forming coalitions. And last but not least, problems that are cross-border in dimension will push states towards cooperation.

The fluctuating number of states, which is a result of the creation of new states and annihilation of existing states, shows that the system is not stable. In other words, there is no reason to see states as the end of history. And although it is difficult to imagine today's world without states in a foreseeable future, one can easily see that the current world order has difficulties in maintaining order, stability and above all human security. The world of states is neither stable nor universal as its four hundred years of history show. And although a world without states is hardly imaginable at this point, both the 'built in' problems as discussed above and the new societal challenges, will force the world of states to change (Van Langenhove 2008; Thakur & Van Langenhove 2008).

Together with the decline of state powers, the concept of multilateralism has changed considerably. This has led to a consequent shift in the perception of security. In the process of changing multilateralism, therefore, it is possible to identify a driving force towards the emergence of human security. Both the transformations occurring in traditional state prerogatives and the changes to the central concept of multilateralism constitute important factors, which are encouraging the development of human security.

Multilateralism was created as a form of cooperation among states that institutionalises intergovernmental co-operation and substitutes anarchy. The starting-point for most scholars who study multilateralism is Keohane's definition and Ruggie's subsequent expansion of it. Multilateral arrangements are institutions defined by the former as "persistent sets of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations and prescribe roles" (Keohane 1990: 48-49) in a purely institutional (rather than normative) manner. Ruggie however, presents a definition that is not only institutional but also normative, including behaviour. From his point of view, multilateralism is "an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct (...) which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard for the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence" (Ruggie 1993:11). Ikenberry states that multilateralism operates at three levels of international order: system multilateralism, ordering or foundational multilateralism, and contract multilateralism. Multilateralism, he continues, can also be understood in terms of its sources. It can emerge from the international system's structural features, the independent influence of pre-existing multilateral institutions, domestic politics and finally multilateralism can be traced to agentic sources (Ikenberry 2003: 535).

However, as the world becomes increasingly multipolar, the institutional architecture to organise global governance needs to be adapted. The present system of multilateralism is under attack and not able to cope with the challenges of globalisation. One way of picturing this is to speak of 'multilateralism 2.0', a metaphor that refers to a networked system of global governance where states operate next to non-state actors such as regions and where there exist different parallel 'theatres' of multilateral relations. In this context, global governance in a multipolar world can only be achieved if states and other actors of governance, such as regions, embrace a radical new way of thinking and acting. The challenge is therefore not only a UN-reform, but a reform of the Westphalian world order. References to 'Human Security' can be understood as part of this transformation.

The shift from multilateralism 1.0 to multilateralism 2.0 is indeed characterised by the emergence of network thinking and practices in international relations as well as by the introduction of new actors and new concepts. In multilateralism 1.0, the principle agents in the interstate space of international relations are states. National governments are the 'star players'. Intergovernmental organisations are only dependent agents whose degrees of freedom only go as far as the states allow them. The primacy of sovereignty is the ultimate principle of international relations. In multilateralism 2.0, there are other players than sovereign states that have a role and some of these players challenge the notion of sovereignty.

As far as concerns the players, states have now created a large number of global and regional institutions that have themselves become players in the international order. Some of these new players, although not states, do resemble states. An institution such as the EU is an example of this trend (one can point for instance to its presence as observer in the UN, its voting rights at the IMF and its membership of the G8, etc.). Other regional organisations are following suit –although not to the same extent as the EU.. As a result, one can say that we are currently witnessing a transition from a world of states to a world of regions. This trend is further reinforced by the phenomenon of devolution, whereby state powers are in some states transferred to subnational regions. And some of these subnational regional entities have growing ambitions to be present on the international stage as well. This challenges sovereignty, as both the supra-national and sub-national regions have statehood properties.

The thus created world order is often pictured as a stratified space of layers of governance from local to global. Advocates of the principle of subsidiarity argue that governance should be done at the lowest level possible. Others stress that cooperation between the different layers is needed to promote 'multi-level' governance. But the reality that has recently emerged is much more complex than a single bottom-up hierarchical line of governance. First of all, there is no single 'top' level. The UN and Bretton Woods institutions stand for a plurality of top-levels. Secondly, at the regional level there is no perfect match between a regional territory and a regional organisation. On the contrary, one can identify in most cases many different regional organisations that cover more or less the same territory. And finally, states are not necessarily the lowest level; in some cases subnational entities can have their own direct relations with the regional or global level, without passing through the state level. The result is a complex web of relations between four types of actors with statehood properties: global institutions, regional organisations, states and sub-national regional entities.

Finally, the involvement of citizens in multilateralism 1.0 is largely limited to democratic representation at the state-level. The supra-national governance layer does not foresee direct involvement of civil society or any other non-governmental actors. In multilateralism 2.0 there is increased room for non-governmental actors at all levels, including individuals.

Eggers (2005) emphasised the need for governments to move away from industrial approaches and into the information age. This implies more than adopting Web 2.0 tools. It is also about recognising that conventional governments are unable to address society's challenges alone. For Eggers (2005: 234) the shift to Government 2.0 implies that the days of government – be it national or local – acting as singular actors are over. The new paradigm is one of collaboration between governments at different levels and between governments and all other relevant actors in society.

Multilateralism 2.0 can be described in an ideal type way as a concept where states, international and regional organisations and non-governmental actors are the building blocks of the multilateral system. In other words, states are no longer the 'star players' but only players. Moreover, it is no longer possible to make a clear distinction between states and international organisations, as some of the latter have statehood properties as well. Moreover, in multilateralism 2.0, the interactions between states, international organisations and other governance actors are not organised in a hierarchical way but in a networked way. This implies that there is no single 'centre of the universe' in terms of governance. It also implies that there are multiple 'theatres' of multilateral relations. The multilateral 1.0 system is only one of the many playing fields. Finally, in the context of multilateralism 2.0, regions are major 'modes' in the system. On the one hand, they are to be considered as sub-global entities characterised by a high intensity of economic and political relations that can be relatively autonomous of the rest of the world. On the other hand, they will act as supra-national 'poles' of the multipolar world.

It is in this context of decline of state powers and changing multilateralism that the human security concept has emerged. As reality has changed so much in recent years, security thinking has had to adapt to a new perception of sovereignty, new actors and needs. Therefore, security cannot be conceived as a strong military force to protect national interests anymore. The concept of security must face new challenges related to the growing scale of threats, their interdependence and the impossibility of identifying a single actor capable of dealing with them. Human security has consequently empowered new levels of governance and new actors to respond to contemporary threats; it has identified new shades of meaning in the concept of security, now encompassing for instance poverty alleviation, access to resources and the right to food.

In view of all the above-mentioned reasons, human security could become a powerful concept to adapt security thinking to today's reality. As the world at the beginning of the third millennium is confronted with a set of new developments that put heavy pressures or constraints upon the functioning of individual states, human security can be seen as an adaptation of the concept of security, from one that centres on state security to one that centres on human security. This shift is primarily in response to three major pressures, which states have been facing recently. First there is globalisation. To the extent that globalisation makes the world more united (global markets, global problems ...), dividing the world in self-contained sovereign units becomes less relevant and security no longer belongs to the sole sovereignty of states. Secondly, the ICT-driven tendency towards networking has consequences for states and security as well, because safety goes beyond national borders and traditional threats and encompasses people from different continents, as well as a wider range of security challenges. Again, states – as organisations – are becoming less relevant in such a world. Thirdly, there is a change in the concepts of multilateralism and governance, whose cause derives from the above-mentioned trends. This implies a consequent shift in the perception of security and security-related policies. Together, these developments are challenging the whole Westphalian world-order and the consequent perception of security. This is not to say that they will lead to the disappearance of the traditional way of thinking about security, but it points to the necessity for states to re-invent their security policies. In this context, the concept of human security represents a fundamental means to read this new reality, to position a state within international institutions and to identify why some national foreign policies have changed in international relations. Following this analysis, security absorbs borders, interdependence and a strong multi-dimensional approach, shifting from traditional pre-globalised security to a more comprehensive sense of holistic security.

All these elements make it possible to affirm that human security challenges key concepts and practices of the old Westphalian system as, for instance, the primacy of states in the provision of security; the idea that security refers primarily to state security; and the perception that states have the right to be sovereign in their security policies. All these assumptions appear weakened by the essence of human security provisions. This implies that states are now starting to include human security talks in their discourses and are able to support their new policies in this direction with the international trend of encouraging human security in foreign policy actions. States' policies related to human security are now gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the international community and at the same time, thanks to these policies, they are boosting international support for any effort aimed at promoting human security. This cross-fertilisation process increases interest in analysing not only



the concept of human security, its history and development, but also the reasons behind the choice of a human security discourse in international relations.

## A 'Discursive Turn' in Human Security

Human security is centred on the idea that the object of security is the people (security to whom?). The providers of security (security by whom?), the reasons behind human security (why security?), the context in which human security discourses are promoted (security when?) or the agents responsible for diffusing and containing the threats are studied less in the literature on human security. Alongside the analysis of the concept of human security, its origins and development, the research should also be directed to assess why, when and who uses the human security discourse, in order to contextualise its importance and the reasons behind the enlargement of the traditional concept of security.

If one takes into consideration the providers of security, four main levels of analysis should be analysed: at the local level, human security is deeply rooted in the idea of grassroots empowerment. Citizens are often embedded in formal and informal local networks that may help to prevent threats. Municipalities and other administrative structures of local power are also particularly well-equipped in this regard given their proximity to the citizens and the local problems facing them. Some threats to human welfare are highly localised and have a very short range (e.g. water quality) which makes them highly suitable for local interventions. At the national level, the natural social contract presupposes that the state is responsible for the protection of its citizens. Indeed, sovereignty has been equated to responsibility, i.e. state sovereignty consists of fulfilling fundamental protection obligations and respecting core human rights towards its citizens (UN Secretary General 2009). And that protection cannot be limited to physical violence. The state remains the most prominent political actor and the bedrock of social organisation and social protection, and is more powerful and better-resourced than local institutions. At the regional level, regional and other intergovernmental organisations, for instance the European Union, the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, are gradually becoming prominent actors in international relations. A large number of such organisations have strengthened their mandate in peace and security and adopted regional development plans. At the global level, the United Nations and other relevant global institutions are well positioned and mandated to tackle global threats. What they may lack in local specificity and local impact, they compensate for with their capacity to provide international legitimacy to particular actions. These elements related to human security are

supported by the extensive participation of civil society and media, who help to promote the concept. Non-state actors now represent the most powerful promoters of a comprehensive understanding of security, which has deeply influenced national strategies towards security.

All these levels operate in an interdependent and inclusive way. The range of human security threats is heterogeneous and undefined. Therefore no single method or actor is able to counter all threats. Indeed, individuals need to be protected by a wide range of different actors who might intervene according to the specificity of each threat.

If we consider the reasons behind human security discourses, it is possible to observe that some countries have shifted their foreign policy from traditional ways of conceiving security as national defence and international partnerships, to more holistic approaches to the broad sphere of security for their citizens. This may be due to a number of reasons, for instance the particular popularity that the concept of human security has acquired in nowadays foreign policies. It may also be due to the fact that democratic states can no longer continue talking about weapons and control of the borders in a world where threats come from civilian sources and different corners of the planet;. Finally, the cause may be due to the increasing necessity for states to be accepted by other actors on the international stage. Talking about human security in international institutions, during multilateral negotiations or in public speeches, helps states to gain popularity since it shows that they are committed to human dignity and a new perception of political, economic and social needs.

Finally, if we analyse the various contexts in which human security discourse is promoted, we can see that it is normally during international public negotiations that some countries refer to human security values in expecting some changes in another county's attitudes. Human security is often brought to the table *vis-à-vis* non-democratic regimes and for promoting commitment to international agreements. References to human security appear less frequently in national parliaments, regulations or speeches for the local press. On the contrary, the tendency of politicians nowadays is to focus on national identity and citizenship instead of on inclusive rights when referring to internal policies.

The case of the European Union is quite unique. If we consider who is talking about human security in this context, it is possible to affirm that all the EU institutions are deeply committed to promoting this concept beyond its borders. Moreover, if we consider why the EU is so interested in widely spreading human security, we can trace an implicit interest in a strong political mandate in promoting stability and security as the motive for is taking on a leading role as human security

driver. Finally, thinking about the context in which the discourse on human security is triggered in the EU, it is possible to identify the same trend in national policies: the EU is using human security as flag for its external policies, but internally, it is much more difficult to defend and protect those rights and values, which are related to human security. This derives from the fact that national interests continue to play a fundamental role in the EU and topics such as protection of minorities, right to a fair social system and freedom of press are still sensitive issues in some member states.

Taking all the above-mentioned new trends into account, it can be seen that human security is a complex concept. Moreover, the concept of what security entails is constantly changing. This implies that our thinking about human security needs to be contextualised. We cannot decouple human security from either the actors that refer to it (and claim to act in order to reduce security threats), nor from the public spaces, in which security is discussed and acted upon. And finally, it has to be acknowledged that the concept of human security in practice overlaps with other concepts such as governance and multilateralism.

In line with the social constructionist schools, one can aim at a discursive approach to the study of human security. This can be done by focusing on different 'conversational' or discursive contexts. Following positioning theory (Harré & Van Langenhove 1999; Slocum & Van Langenhove 2003), one can distinguish three elements of such an approach: first, the study of speech acts. Security is a concept. As noted by Floyd and Croft (2009) something becomes a security issue because it is spoken of in the language of security. The logic behind it is the Austinean "performative speech act". It is through such acts that 'securitisation' takes place: "the act of classifying an issue as a matter of security, implying that the issue is presented as an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure" (Buzan, Waever & de Wilde 1998: 24). The second element is the study of the actors. They can position themselves in different ways. The third and last element is the study of the story-lines.

Acting and talking about human security always occurs in a discursive context. This means that there is never an 'absolute' position to take. What the actors say about human security and how they act has to be seen in relation to what other actors say and the 'dialogue' between these actors. We therefore have to link the actorness in human security to interactions with (i) states, (ii) regional organisations, and (iii) multilateral organisations. There might be other actors of possible relevance as well, such as NGOs. Actors can take different positions when talking about and acting on human security issues. The concept of a speaking position refers to the set of rights, duties and

obligations with respect to the kind of (speech) acts that an actor occupying a certain position can, or is expected to, legitimately and properly execute (Harré & Van Langenhove 1999).

Positioning theory was initially conceived to analyse social relations between persons, but it can be applied to all parts of social reality where actors are involved. A simple illustration is the position of being a permanent member in the Security Council. This implies that one can engage in certain discourses (for instance demanding another state to stop a certain action) and that one can perform certain acts (such as vetoing) that other states cannot.

In the discursive approach, the emphasis is more on how the concepts are used than on what they mean. Indeed, concepts can be regarded as tools that actors use for specific reasons. Their meaning is not pre-given but the result of a joint undertaking by the actors involved or, as Diez (1999) once noted: “discourse is part of reality”. This implies that our research on human security should focus on what the discursive tools are used for and what they do in certain contexts.

## Conclusions

This paper has tried to demonstrate that the concept of human security, besides its fundamental content-related importance, also represents a tool used by certain actors to take advantage of and challenge the Westphalian world order and its related security paradigm. At the level of the state, this can be caused by a shift in foreign policy priorities, the widening popularity of a human security concept or specific national strategies in creating international partnerships and alliances with other actors. As for non-state actors, they have a strong interest in contributing to the progressive decline of state powers or changing multilateralism. In this context, human security represents a key means to ensure the participation of a multiplicity of actors and to empower civil society. Finally, human security offers the means to include in the concept of security itself, elements that ensure there is continuous debate on the issues of state sovereignty, governance and multilateralism.

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## EU-GRASP

Changing Multilateralism: the EU as a Global-regional Actor in Security and Peace, or EU-GRASP in short, is an EU funded FP7 Programme. EU-GRASP aims to contribute to the analysis and articulation of the current and future role of the EU as a global actor in multilateral security governance, in a context of challenged multilateralism, where the EU aims at “effective multilateralism”. This project therefore examines the notion and practice of multilateralism in order to provide the required theoretical background for assessing the linkages between the EU’s current security activities with multi-polarism, international law, regional integration processes and the United Nations system.

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