

**General Assembly Thematic Debate on Human Security**  
**New York**  
**14 April 2011**

**Introduction**

The informal Thematic Debate on Human Security was convened as a follow-up to the adoption of the General Assembly Resolution 64/291 in July 2010, in which Member States decided to continue their consideration of the notion of human security. The debate followed the informal Thematic Debate on Human Security in the General Assembly held in May 2008 and the informal panel discussion and the plenary meeting of the General Assembly held in May 2010. It aimed to support the goals of the General Assembly resolution and to contribute to the discussions on human security through the exchange of perspectives among Member States and experts, with a focus on forging a common understanding on the core elements of human security, its added value and possible approaches to a definition thereof.

The panelists and participants discussed the understanding of human security as a comprehensive concept encompassing freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity. Noting the progress that has been made through previous and ongoing discussions, participants and panelists focused on providing inputs that would affirm and supplement existing knowledge, highlight the primary concerns among Member States and advance progress towards building consensus within the General Assembly.

**Panel 1: A possible approach for defining Human Security**

Panelists and participants discussed human security as a notion that brings together the agendas of security, development and human rights. As such, human security responds to the need for an expanded paradigm of security that encompasses the broad range of conditions threatening the survival, livelihoods and dignity of people. While national security remains an essential condition for peace, and a prerogative of States, it has been increasingly recognized that security must be considered from a broader perspective that can account for the current and emerging threats in a globalized world.

Panelists and many participants supported a pragmatic approach to human security rather than a legal and rigid definition. In this regard, several panelists noted that a dynamic and broad framework rather than a strict definition might be more appropriate in considering the notion of human security. Such an approach allows Governments to refine the notion as they identify the most critical and pervasive threats within their respective societies. As an inherently people-centred notion, human security supports the prioritization of the threats and vulnerabilities in a particular context and at a given time thereby advancing solutions that are targeted and contextually relevant. By doing so, a human security approach provides useful information for Governments that allow local realities and capacities to define local solutions and responses.

Some participants expressed concern over the misuse of the notion in the absence of a clear definition and in particular, its potential use as a justification for external intervention into the internal affairs of a State. While such concerns warrant careful consideration, several panelists and participants emphasized that States bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the human security of their people. Moreover, panelists stated that human security does not propose the use or the threat of the use of military force to achieve its objectives. In this context, several participants emphasized the importance of distinguishing the Responsibility to Protect from human security, as they are two distinct notions and agendas.

Panelists and participants discussed the importance of including people in the discussions on human security in order to better identify the specific threats and vulnerabilities individuals and communities face. One panelist suggested placing emphasis on perceived threats in order to better understand what matters for people with regard to their security. Bringing people into the discussion allows for the development of a policy-relevant understanding of human security in addition to helping pinpoint the critical vulnerabilities in a specific context so that Governments can respond in a preventive manner and avoid potential spirals into greater insecurities.

There was general consensus on the need for policy norms rather than a legal framework for human security. Given its potential applicability to a wide and diverse range of problems, however, some participants questioned the value of human security as a policy tool. In this context, a significant number of interventions considered the idea of developing an index of human security. Participants and panelists presented differing perspectives with regard to the scope, applicability and practicality of an index. Proposals ranged from the development of a global index permitting country comparisons to the development of community-specific indices that contribute to a richer and more detailed picture of the vulnerabilities and threats facing people in a particular context and at a given point in time.

## **Panel 2: Human Security – Its application and added value**

Panelists and participants discussed the added value of human security as a framework for bringing together the different agenda items of the United Nations and tackling them in their totality and interconnectedness. Such a framework requires examining the relationship among security, development and human rights to identify the inter-linkages among them and to promote a coherence of actions and strategies accordingly.

The value of human security is that it forces consideration of security as more than just the absence of conflict. Security today, noted one panelist, is less about securing borders from external enemies and more about preventing internal violence. In addition to issues of violence, other panelists and participants introduced the critical security implications of a range of issues including: financial and food crises, environmental change and natural hazards, poverty and social exclusion, and human rights violations. Panelists and participants highlighted the added value of applying the notion of human security to these issues.

With its policy-orientation and prioritization on reducing social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, a human security approach emphasizes protection and empowerment in order to strengthen institutional capacity in tandem with strengthening the capacity of individuals and communities to act on their own behalf. In doing so, human security enhances the coping capacity of societies. The approach promotes empowerment of all actors within a society with a view towards fostering coexistence and building stronger cooperation.

Panelists and participants also drew attention to the preventive element engrained in the notion of human security. As a result, human security shifts the focus to developing mechanisms aimed at more effective preparation in the face of threats, such as early warning, as well as mitigating the harmful impacts of threats, some of which cannot be prevented. The focus on prevention thus provides the opportunity for policymakers, scientists and communities to collaboratively develop appropriate coping strategies. In this regard, human security promotes the development of an integrated network of diverse stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector.

Echoing comments during the first interactive panel discussion, several participants highlighted that while many of the threats facing people need to be addressed, they must be done in line with national priorities and under the principles of the United Nations Charter. In this context, panelists reiterated that bringing in the dimension of security to the debate on a range of issues was not intended to legitimize the use of force, but rather to encourage the consideration of political strategies to cope with various threats and hazards in a preventive and comprehensive manner at the national and, when appropriate, regional and global levels.

While some participants cautioned that an ambiguous notion of human security may be difficult to operationalize, other participants suggested that in the absence of a clear definition, it was still necessary to build on the notion of human security and consider the existing frameworks that can provide concrete guidance. Recognizing the legitimacy of concerns regarding the potential misuse in the absence of a concrete definition, one panelist asserted that it was still necessary to build a case-by-case working framework for human security.

## **Conclusion**

The informal Thematic Debate emphasized the importance of continued consultation on the notion of human security. While discussions will continue, for the most part, Member States and panelists alike felt that there was movement towards a general consideration of the parameters by which the notion could be framed. Among these, there was a shared understanding that human security embodies a people-centred approach, which focuses on defining priorities based on local realities and capacities. It was also highlighted that human security is a practical and policy-oriented approach to address the growing interdependence of threats to survival, livelihoods and dignity for people in their daily lives.

It was stressed that the approach must be one that is fully in line with the Charter of the United Nations. Such an approach can support Governments in identifying threats and vulnerabilities that are most pertinent within their societies. In this context, human security can be seen as a perspective that strengthens the resilience and responses of States to situations of insecurity for their peoples. For transnational threats, tackling insecurity also requires collaboration at the regional and/or international level and in this regard, human security can contribute to more integrated and targeted strategies.

The discussions of the Thematic Debate will contribute to the ongoing consultative process among Member States and to the preparations of the report of the Secretary-General on human security to be submitted to the General Assembly during its sixty-sixth session.