

General Assembly Thematic Debate on Human Security
New York
22 May 2008

Introduction

At the 2005 World Summit, Heads of States and Governments committed themselves to further discussing and defining the notion of human security in the General Assembly. To this end, paragraph 143 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (A/RES/60/1) recognized that *“all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential”*.

As a follow-up to the commitment expressed by the Members States, H.E. Srgjan Kerim, President of the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly, invited all Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers to the United Nations to an informal thematic debate of the General Assembly on human security. The meeting took place on 22 May 2008 in the Economic and Social Council Chamber (10am-1pm) and later in Conference Room 4 (3pm-6pm).

The aim of the informal thematic debate was to reflect on human security's multidimensional scope and to explore ways to make further progress on the initial reference to human security in paragraph 143 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document.

Opening remarks

In his opening speech, the President of the General Assembly (PGA), H.E. Srgjan Kerim, underlined the interface between security, development and human rights which lies at the core of human security. He stated that the notion of human security; its emphasis on comprehensive, integrated and people-centered solutions; and its significance for the challenges we face has been recognized as an important tool by a growing number of Member States.

The PGA explained that by surpassing the understanding of security beyond state security, human security calls for holistic, people-centered solutions that focus on people, their protection and empowerment. In this context, the PGA noted that the United Nations through its global efforts to advance security, development and human rights is an important nexus in further evolving the notion of human security.

Furthermore, the PGA recognized the added value of human security for bringing together the different agenda items of the UN and tackling them in their totality and interconnectedness. The PGA emphasized that lasting results at the crossroads of security, development and human rights can only be achieved through a collaborative

effort by bringing together Member States, international organizations, UN Funds, Programmes and Specialized Agencies as well as civil societies and NGOs.

The PGA ended his opening remarks by thanking the Member States for their participation and by highlighting the need to propagate a new culture of international relations with the principle of human security at its core. He noted that such a culture, though intrinsically embedded in the UN's ideals has never been truly enacted in practice. He hoped that this debate will help clarify the notion of human security and provide guidance on how it can contribute to UN's efforts in bringing peace, development and human rights to peoples everywhere.

Keynote address

H.R.H. Prince El-Hassan bin Talal of Jordan thanked President Kerim for his kind invitation to address the General Assembly on this crucial topic. H.R.H Prince El-Hassan bin Talal began his presentation by reviewing the current global conditions regarding population, food, resource, environmental, energy, monetary, cultural, and state security, referring to them as transnational issues as well as multipliers of human security with the capacity to spread either stability or instability in and around the world.

H.R.H Prince El-Hassan bin Talal then elaborated on these diverse and yet pivotal security concerns, highlighting the various ways in which issues of population growth, poverty, food, resources, ecology, migration, energy, money, peace and cultural understanding have the capacity to highly impact individual lives at the global scale. He urged Governments to move beyond traditional notions of security and view the full range of inter-personal, community-oriented, and culturally-founded relationships that capture the true notion of human security.

Throughout his presentation, H.R.H. Prince El-Hassan bin Talal stressed the need to promote international and cross-boarder cooperation by providing everyone the opportunity to live free from fear and want and by developing their full potentials in a healthy and supporting environment where individual, state and international rights are seen as indivisible and a dynamic unity and not as a source of polarization and conflict.

Debate by Member States and Observers

Member States and Observers thanked the PGA for convening this informal thematic debate on human security. Recognizing the General Assembly as the most appropriate organ to further discuss the concept, several Representatives noted that the current debate on human security presents an important step toward widening the recognition of human security as a significant concept within the United Nations. Moreover, Representatives noted that despite the differences of views on human security, the difficulty in defining the concept does not diminish the contribution that human security brings to addressing current global challenges from achieving the Millennium Development Goals to advancing peacebuilding efforts and responding to climate change, among others.

Accordingly, members of the Friends of Human Security (FHS) informed the participants that the FHS as a flexible and open-ended platform for Member States has agreed to pursue concrete collaboration in line with the broad understanding of human security as articulated in the report of the Commission on Human Security and contained in the outcome document of the 2005 World Summit.

Meanwhile, several Representatives recognized the added value of human security as: (i) a people-centered approach that puts the livelihood and dignity of individuals and communities at the center of analysis and thereby allows for a more concrete assessment of actions needed when addressing global issues; (ii) an integrated, comprehensive and multi-sectoral approach that brings together not only physical security but also the sense of security that comes from having enough to eat, adequate healthcare, access to resources, employment opportunities and respect for human rights; and finally (iii) a preventive approach that provides early warning so that threats from both violent and non-violent menaces do not result in critical, pervasive and protracted crisis.

Furthermore, some Representatives noted that in practice the notion of human security has already been implemented in a number of projects carried out by UN Member States as well as UN Funds, Programmes, and Specialized Agencies. Representatives therefore stressed the need to move beyond definitional issues and instead focus on concrete collaboration on the basis of a broad and common understanding of human security. In this context, several Member States highlighted the significant contributions of the Human Security Unit in OCHA and its efforts to mainstream human security in UN activities, as well as the essential role of the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security in translating the concept of human security into concrete actions that highlight the added value of the human security approach.

While recognizing the important advances made in propagating the human security notion, other Representatives emphasized the need to agree on a specific and unambiguous definition of human security. For some, human security, if not defined, could lead to a conceptual overstretch that will hinder its added value and operational impact. Thereby several representatives noted the need to seek consensus on a more limited programme where the human security approach can be applied.

Among the more than 40 delegations taking the floor, the issue of climate change was brought forward by a large number of Representatives describing it as a multidimensional challenge that severely impacts the most vulnerable communities. With limited adaptive capacities and strong dependency on climate sensitive resources among the most vulnerable, many emphasized the impacts of climate change on loss of livelihoods (due to diminishing capacities for agricultural and fishery activities), increasing infectious diseases (due to temperature rises and increased intensity of natural disasters), tensions over natural resources (land and water), and increased migratory pressures (environmentally forced migration). Representatives also highlighted the relationship between climate change and the undergoing food crisis.

Meanwhile, the importance of differentiating human security from the responsibility to protect was highlighted by several Member States. In addressing this issue, it was stated that national Governments have the primary responsibility to provide security for their people and that the international community by providing the necessary assistance or capacity building should support Governments in meeting their obligations and in ensuring human security for their peoples. Representatives also added that human security should unite efforts by reinforcing collaboration among all actors and should not be the cause of disagreement or conflict of interests.

In addition, several Representatives highlighted that as a people-centered and multi-sectoral approach, human security provides a significant opportunity for the United Nations to better integrate the three pillars of the organization's work (i.e., security, development and human rights) and offer coordinated responses that can more efficiently address current challenges facing the world, such as, rising food prices, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, climate change, and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In this regard, Representatives emphasized the contribution of human security in UN's effort to implement the 'One UN' reform programme.

Similarly, the importance of effective and coordinated implementation across actors was underlined by many Representatives. Member States and Observers noted that in order to respond adequately to current global problems, a common action plan that brings together diverse actors from all sectors of society – Governments, private sector and civil society – is required.

Finally, a proposal for the establishment of a working group on human security was put forward by some Representatives as a follow-up to the debate. The working group is envisaged to identify specific areas in which the human security concept can be applied thereby further informing the General Assembly of the operational and the added value of the concept.

Closing remarks

Following the interactive debate among Member States and Observers, H.R.H. Prince El-Hassan bin Talal, urged the Representatives to take advantage of the application of human security and to work closely together and improve the living conditions of those most in need. In this regard, he supported the establishment of the working group on human security and urged Governments to set aside their differences and listen to the voices of the millions ravaged by human insecurities and constant daily suffering.

In his concluding remarks, H.E. Srgjan Kerim, President of the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly, reminded the participants of the links between human security and the UN Charter. He reiterated that human security is about a new culture of international relations that aims to tackle multiple challenges from a human-centered perspective in ways that are collaborative, responsive and sustainable. He thanked Member States and Observers for their constructive discussions and H.R.H. Prince El-Hassan bin Talal for

delivering the keynote speech for this debate and looked forward to further discuss and develop this important concept.