Health and Human Security

Welcome to the eighth issue of ‘Human Security at the United Nations’. Since the previous edition, significant milestones have been reached towards advancing the notion of human security at the United Nations and beyond. Most notably, on 10 September 2012, Member States gathered at the General Assembly and adopted, by consensus, resolution 66/290 on human security. In adopting this significant and timely resolution, Member States have now reached a common understanding on human security that will significantly strengthen activities to advance human security within and beyond the United Nations.

The resolution draws on the recommendations made by the Secretary-General in his second report on human security (A/66/763) which was released on 5 April 2012 and subsequently debated at the General Assembly on 6 June 2012. As a follow-up to General Assembly resolution 64/291, this second report is based on contributions by Member States as well as a series of informal consultations conducted by the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General (SASG) on human security, Mr Yukio Takasu. In addition to outlining key aspects towards forming a common understanding on the notion of human security, the report also provides a summary of discussions on human security at the General Assembly and highlights areas where the application of human security can bring added value to the work of the Organisation.

One of the areas highlighted by the Secretary-General in his report is the connection between health and human security. This issue will further examine this relationship and will highlight possible contributions that the human security approach can provide to current and on-going activities in this area. Special attention will be given to the work of the Pan-American Health Organisation/World Health Organisation (PAHO/WHO) which has been leading efforts on this topic, as well as projects funded by the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (UNTFHS) that have provided greater analysis and application of the relationship between health and human security.

The Relationship between Health and Human Security

Improvements in health are not only dependent on continued commitments to enhance the availability of health-care and to strengthen disease prevention systems, they are also shaped by social, economic and environmental conditions which, if not addressed, can impede progress in this pivotal area. In some regions, poverty, inadequate housing and poor environmental conditions may be the major contributing factors to ill health. Meanwhile, in other regions violent crime and domestic and sexual abuse are the main threats to improvements in health. Moreover, shocks or sudden events such as natural disasters or economic and financial downturns can devastate health-care systems and further deteriorate the health status of the most vulnerable.

Therefore, to achieve the health-related Millennium Development Goals, as well as to reduce the global burden of diseases, it is crucial to consider health within its broader social, economic and environmental context. While disease-specific approaches are required, they also need to be complemented with comprehensive strategies that take into account the specific cluster of factors that contribute to ill health.
Such an analysis helps to strengthen the development of appropriate responses across sectors. Subsequently, through the lens of the human security approach, we are able to advance more targeted, effective and sustainable responses to meet the health-related Millennium Development Goals.

At the same time, past efforts have demonstrated that improvements in health and human security depend on implementing comprehensive protection and empowerment strategies. Protection measures aim at preventing, monitoring and anticipating health-related threats. They entail developing early warning and response mechanisms, as well as strengthening preparedness to identify, validate and control health-related challenges. Meanwhile, empowerment measures rely on improving health-care systems, training health professionals, educating and mobilising the public and developing local-level health insurance schemes that reach the most vulnerable within populations. Such a comprehensive framework improves preparedness for current and emerging health-related challenges and extends our progress in the provision of affordable, functioning and accessible health-care, both of which are instrumental to long-term prosperity and development.

The Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO/WHO) – Promoting health and human security in the Americas

PAHO/WHO has been at the forefront of efforts to promote health as an entry point for human security. The origin of these efforts can be found in the report entitled ‘Health and Hemispheric Security’ which was submitted to the Committee on Hemispheric Security of the Permanent Council of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in 2002. The report brings attention to the fundamental role that health plays in human security and attests that health and human security are mutually dependent and reinforcing (better health leads to greater human security and greater human security leads to better health).

Since then, PAHO/WHO has been leading the initiative to examine the relationship between health and human security. Accordingly, in 2010, the 50th Directing Council of the Organisation passed Resolution CD50.R16, entitled ‘Health, Human Security and Well-being’. Urging Member States to consider how the concept of human security could be integrated into their national health plans, the resolution draws upon the report of the 50th Directing Council, Document CD50/17, and asks the Secretariat to further advance the human security approach by holding multilateral discussions at various forums, including the United Nations, on the added value of the human security approach and its integration into national health plans.

Guided by Resolution CD50.R16, PAHO/WHO invited Governments and UN Country Teams to two sub-regional technical meetings in Central America and held an additional International Technical Discussion meeting. These meetings culminated in the publication of a technical reference document entitled ‘Human Security: Implications for Public Health’ in August 2012. More recently, in September 2012, PAHO/WHO and the Japan Center for International Exchange (JCIE) co-hosted a three-day Regional Meeting on Health and Human Security in Lima, Peru. The meeting served to disseminate the concept of human security; present the UN Secretary-General's second report on human security (A/66/763); and assess a number of existing health interventions identified throughout the Americas that attempt to integrate a human security approach. Project visits, presentations and the interactive discussions during the three-day meeting generated key insights for the development of policy guidelines and tools which can help further facilitate the implementation of health and human security throughout the countries of the region.

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By considering the broad range of factors pivotal to improvements in health, the human security approach considers the ways in which public health strategies are compromised under complex situations of insecurity, such as, natural disasters, conflict, poverty, poor sanitation and food insecurity. Rather than tackling ill health through stand-alone interventions, UNTFHS funded projects promote initiatives that take into account the different sources and manifestations of human insecurity in a given situation. This helps strengthen the development of integrated responses that address both the systemic and behavioural challenges needed for improvements in health. Below are two examples from UNTFHS funded projects where communities are faced with multiple human security challenges and, therefore, solutions require comprehensive responses through which different domains of human security (e.g. health, food, economic, environmental, among others) can be addressed.

Due to the Aral Sea environmental disaster, Karakalpakstan, in the north-western region of Uzbekistan, is faced with devastating human insecurities. Once the world’s fourth largest lake, the Aral Sea provided both irrigation and fishing opportunities for the local populations of Karakalpakstan. Considered one of the world’s worst environmental disasters, the situation is particularly acute in the north of the region where income poverty, growing salinisation of land and water resources, lack of food security, exposure to dust storms, poor quality of drinking water, and the declining health status of the local population is forcing many to relocate or endure severe living conditions at home.

To better address the multiple threats to human security in the region, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA and WHO recently teamed-up to implement a comprehensive approach to improve the economic, food, health and environmental security in three of the poorer and more marginal districts in Karakalpakstan.

The project works to protect vulnerable communities though strengthening the capacity of local authorities to implement policies that improve the quality of and access to basic social services. By collaborating with Government counterparts in the promotion of infrastructure, the project is improving the distribution of water and sanitation services, bringing energy to the poorest communities and expanding access to sustainable health-care to over 500,000 people. Meanwhile, beneficiaries are empowered to mitigate the impact of the identified insecurities through programmes that advance sustainable livelihoods and employment opportunities. This has resulted in increased activities in tourism, greater productivity in the cropping and livestock sectors, and the improved production and marketing of local handicrafts.

In Colombia, the UNTFHS is supporting a project that brings together eight UN agencies (FAO, OCHA, PAHO/WHO, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIFEM, UNODC and WFP) through an integrated approach that helps address the multiple human security threats faced by vulnerable communities in the district of Altos de la Florida in Soacha, a municipality of about 450,000 inhabitants located near Bogota. Despite efforts by the Government, 50 years of armed conflict and the existence of powerful drug cartels, together with high levels of poverty, insufficient coverage of basic social services and lack of access to economic opportunities have had a dramatic impact on the human security of the population. The project subsequently highlights the need for both immediate (the need to reduce vulnerability, relieve urgent needs and protect human rights) and long-term (in particular, the need to strengthen local governance

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in order to provide a more effective and durable response to meeting the basic needs of the population) solutions. By identifying a broad range of interconnected issues/sectors (health, education, food, nutrition, sanitation, housing, safety and employment), the project promotes the prioritisation of interventions through a participatory approach that involves the engagement of the UN system, the relevant entities of the Government, civil society and community based organisations, as well as the participating community members.

With a focus to improving the protection and empowerment needs of the district, effective instruments for assisting the internally displaced persons (IDPs); advancing women’s rights; implementing community-based food, nutrition, housing and sanitation plans; improving access to education for children and adolescents; strengthening vocational training for those most vulnerable; and promoting greater social cohesion among community members have been established. Moreover, these activities have been complemented with the formulation of public policies on gender, youth, IDPs, food, and personal and community security. These public policies which are part of the Mayor’s plan for Soacha, including the district of Altos de la Florida, further ensure the sustainability of the achievements of the project.

The Human Security Unit launches its new website and a new brochure on “Human Security at the United Nations”

As the primary communication platform on human security at the United Nations, the Human Security Unit (HSU) has redesigned and re-launched the human security website. The new website will deliver a more functional and user friendly platform to showcase the work of the Advisory Board on Human Security (ABHS), the UNTFHS, and the HSU – all of which are critical to disseminate further the human security approach and its application. The new website will focus the attention of the audience on the many achievements of the United Nations’ work on human security including developments in the General Assembly, as well as accomplishments and lessons learned from UNTFHS funded projects. Project summaries, beneficiary testimonials, photos and videos, among others, will be available on the new website.

In addition, a series of informational products on the human security approach and its application through the UNTFHS are also being developed. The first of these, a brochure entitled Human Security at the United Nations, provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of human security, its trajectory within the United Nations, as well as examples of lessons learned from UNTFHS projects in four thematic areas. Additional products will be forthcoming.

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Latest News and Events

In addition to the 66th session of the General Assembly and recent initiatives by PAHO/WHO, below are some key human security events this year:

Twelfth Meeting of the Advisory Board on Human Security took place in New York from 8-9 November, 2012. Documents in support of the meeting, including the UNTFHS annual progress report, will be made available on the UNTFHS website.

Summit on Health and Human Security was held in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on 6 September 2012. The summit was hosted by the Observatory for Safety and Conviviality, an effort of the Juarez Municipal Government, the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez, and the PAHO/WHO United States-Mexico Border Office.

On 26 June 2012, the Civil Society Network for Human Security, an initiative established by the Dutch development organisation Cordaid and the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), hosted a side event entitled ‘Addressing Violent Extremism: Creating spaces for civil society engagement’ at the Church Centre of the United Nations in New York. The event presented the human security approach in countering violent extremism and was followed by panel discussions by participants from North East India, West Africa, Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa.

The Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum, organised by Search for Common Ground and 3P Human Security in Washington D.C., dedicated its meeting on 8 May 2012 to the topic of ‘Human Security in Practice’. Panellists described how the United Nations, the U.S. Government, and civil society organisations are operationalising human security in diverse contexts and discussed different approaches and common understandings on the application of human security. Mr. Yukio Takasu, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on human security (SASG), joined a panel of distinguished speakers including Mary Kaldor, Director, Civil Society and Human Security Research Unit at the London School of Economics; Sean McFate, Assistant Professor, Department of International Security Studies at the National Defense University; and William Tsuma, Programme Manager, Preventive Action and Human Security at Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). In the afternoon, a roundtable discussion hosted by Connect U.S. and moderated by 3P Human Security, brought together stakeholders working in the U.S. Government, the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank and civil society organisations. Participants shared views on the application of human security, civilian security, civilian protection and related terms with a view to identifying shared principles and clarifying the use of these concepts in diverse contexts.

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