



BACKGROUND TO THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN SECURITY

While the term “human security” may be of recent origin, the ideas that underpin the concept are far from new. For more than a century – at least since the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the 1860s – a doctrine based on the security of people has been gathering momentum. Core elements of this doctrine were formalized in the 1940s in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Geneva Conventions.

The specific phrase “human security” is most commonly associated with the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, an attempt to capture the post-Cold War peace dividend and redirect those resources towards the development agenda. The definition advanced in the report was extremely ambitious. Human security was defined as the summation of seven distinct dimensions of security: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political. By focusing on people and highlighting non-traditional threats, the UNDP made an important contribution to post-Cold War thinking about security.

The very breadth of the UNDP approach, however, made it unwieldy as a policy instrument. Equally important, in emphasizing the threats associated with underdevelopment, the Report largely ignored the continuing human insecurity resulting from violent conflict. Yet by the UNDP’s own criteria, human insecurity is greatest during war. Of the 25 countries at the bottom of the 1998 Human Development Index, more than half are suffering the direct or indirect effects of violent conflict. The UNDP definition of human security was proposed as a key concept during the preparatory stages of the 1995 Copenhagen Summit on Social Development. But it was rejected during the Summit and has not been widely used thereafter.