Human Security: Protecting People in a Dangerous World,
Autumn 2005

Human Security is a genuine, honest-to-God Canadian-borne foreign policy innovation.

It is a large and growing success story that is little known and less appreciated in this country.

Like so many things Canadian, it has to be validated by foreigners, preferably Americans, before we permit ourselves to believe it is truly significant.

Human security puts the individual, not the state, at the centre of policy calculations.

Human security is increasingly widely used to describe the complex of interrelated threats associated with civil war, genocide and the displacement of populations.

Human security and national security should be—and often are—mutually reinforcing.

But secure states do not automatically mean secure peoples.

Protecting citizens from foreign attack may be a necessary condition for the security of individuals, but it is certainly not a sufficient one.

Indeed, during the last 100 years far more people have been killed by their own governments than by foreign armies.

A new approach to security is needed because the analytic frameworks that have traditionally explained wars between states—and prescribed policies to prevent them—

are largely irrelevant to violent conflicts within states.

The latter now make up more than 95% of armed conflicts.

At this point, it is worth recalling how Canada developed the Human Security idea.

When Lloyd Axworthy was Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, I was the "political director" in the Canadian Foreign Affairs Department.

At that time, we were looking for a policy term that would encapsulate the comparatively innovative security agenda we were carrying out under Lloyd's Axworthy's direction.

It was, in essence, a "people-protection" agenda.

It included the anti-personnel land mines treaty,

a small arms treaty,

the protection of women in armed conflict,

the protection of conflict-affected children,

the abortive Canadian-led intervention in eastern Zaire,

Canadian participation in the Kosovo war,

operational reforms of the Security Council,

the International Criminal Court,

and the Responsibility to Protect report that the Government of Canada had commissioned (and which was adopted at the recent UN summit, one of the few successes of the summit).

We knew this all worked in practice but, as the saying goes, we needed a theoretical term

a simple phrase that would at once explain it, "cohere" it and, we hoped, dignify it.

The honour of coining the term "human security" usually goes to the late Mabul ul-Haq who used it in the much-cited UNDP Human Development Report of 1994.

although in fact it was used even earlier by the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros Ghali.

Ul-Haq used a very broad definition, including seven or eight evils from which people needed protection, including economic deprivation, unemployment, etc.

In any case, the Government of Canada did not invent the term "Human Security"; we simply appropriated it.

The Government of Canada was, nonetheless, probably the first government to embrace the term, Human Security,

and to use it extensively, some might say brazenly in acknowledging no intellectual property rights, to describe a central purpose of our foreign policy.

Human security means different things to different people.

All proponents of human security agree that its primary goal is the protection of individuals.

However, consensus breaks down over precisely what threats individuals should be protected from.

Proponents of the 'narrow' concept of human security focus on violent threats to individuals or, as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan puts it, 'the protection of communities and individuals from internal violence'.

Proponents of a broader concept of human security argue that the threat agenda should be expanded to include disease and natural disasters because these kill far more people than war, genocide and terrorism combined.

Human security policy, they argue, should seek to protect people from all direct threats to their safety and their lives, as well as from violence.

By this definition, Hurricane Katrina and the Pakistani earthquake come under the Human Security rubric and count as threats to be protected

against

In its broadest formulations, such as Ul Haq's and that of the Japanese Government, the human security agenda would also encompass economic insecurity, environmental breakdown and 'threats to human dignity'.

The Japanese were uncomfortable with the implications for the Japanese constitution of the military dimensions of the Canadian approach.

So uncomfortable that they convened their own commission to research it.

They were, also, concerned about third world sensitivities with respect to military intervention even when all else failed.

And they wanted a term that would get cross-wired with their aspirations for a permanent Security Council seat.

The definition of the term Canada used–essentially the physical protection of people--was much narrower, on purpose.

We wanted a term, nevertheless, that would, over time, become a norm of behaviour

One that would encourage the protection of people, and not only of states, when their existence was threatened.

We, also, wanted a concept that would eventually stand with national security as a basic public policy purpose,

and would be accepted as a reason for military investment.

We believed that the more encompassing economic and social definitions, essentially human well-being and dignity,

while entirely laudable in their objectives,

would risk meaning all things to all people and end up meaning nothing to anyone,

at least nothing new and "actionable" by governments.

As President Bush (admittedly, not often one of my compass points!) has been quoted as saying, "when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority."

In the light of humanity's failures in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Congo and all the rest of the tragic taxonomy of international neglect and indifference, we saw a pressing need for an idea to galvanize action to save innocent lives.

Equally important, we saw the need for a concept which encouraged people who thought that real armies only made war to rally to military action when that action would save lives and protect the innocent,

especially when there was no strategic or other classical, narrow national interest at stake with which to justify action.

By the way, we even experimented with the term "HumSec", in an attempt to make the idea sound more appealing in military-minded precincts, especially in the Canadian Defence Department and in Washington.

The Japanese report has largely disappeared.

The intermediate view of human security has, however, gained many adherents—and it is easy to see why.

Few would dispute the desirability of protecting people from disease and natural disasters as well as from violence.

Moreover there is considerable evidence to suggest that all of these societal threats are interrelated in the mostly poor countries in which they are concentrated.

The various approaches to human security are subject to lively debate.

Such scholarly debate is a normal part of academic life and propels the evolution of new concepts,

but it is of little interest to policymakers.

It is no accident that the broadest conceptions of human security has rarely been used to guide research programs.

In any case, the policy community is increasingly using the term "human security" because it speaks to the interrelatedness of security, development and the protection of civilians.

The UN remains the most effective institution for assuring Human Security.

Why We Have Fewer Wars

The Human Security Report identifies three major political changes over the past 30 years that have radically altered the global security landscape.

First, was the end of colonialism.

From the early 1950s to the early 1980s, colonial wars made up 60-100% of all international conflicts depending on the year.

Today there are no such wars.

Second, was the end of the Cold War, which had driven approximately one-third of all conflicts in the post-World War II.

This removed any residual threat of war between the major powers, and Washington and Moscow stopped fueling "proxy wars" in the

developing world.

Third, was the unprecedented upsurge of international activities designed to stop ongoing wars and prevent new ones starting that took place in the wake of the Cold War.

Spearheaded by the UN these activities included:

A six-fold increase in UN preventive diplomacy missions (to stop wars starting).

A four-fold increase in UN peacemaking missions (to end ongoing conflicts).

A four-fold increase in UN peace operations (to reduce the risk of wars restarting).

An eleven-fold increase in the number of states subject to UN sanctions (which can help pressure warring parties into peace negotiations).

The UN did not act alone, of course.

The World Bank, donor states, regional organizations and thousands of NGOs worked closely with UN agencies—and often played independent roles of their own.

But the UN, the only international organization with a global security

mandate, has been the leading player.

As this upsurge of international activism grew in scope and intensity through the 1990s, the number of crises, wars and genocides declined, despite the much-publicized failures.

The evidence that these initiatives worked is not just circumstantial.

A recent RAND corporation study, for example, found that two thirds of the UN's peace building missions had succeeded.

In addition, the sharp increase in peacemaking efforts led to a significant increase in the number of conflicts that ended in negotiated settlements.

Approximately half of all the peace agreements negotiated between 1946 and 2003 have been signed since the end of the Cold War.

The annual cost of these changes to the international community has been modest—well under 1% of world military spending.

In fact, the cost of running all of the UN's 17 peace operations around the world for an entire year is less than the United States spends in Iraq in a single month.

Canadqa and the Future of Human Security

When Lloyd Axworthy left office, as they say, to pursue other interests, Canadian foreign policy likewise pursued other interests.

Although the Canadian Government never actually abandoned the human security agenda, it never pursued it again with the same sense of purpose.

In any case, we were well aware at the time that what we were proposing, that is putting people not just states at the heart of security policy, was virtually Copernican in its foreign policy significance.

We were also aware that that is what many Canadians thought we had been doing all along, in UN peace-keeping.

Canadians did not erect a monument to their peace-keepers in downtown Ottawa because they thought it strategically important to Canadian interests to keep President A safe from insurgent B,

or to protect the army of country X from the army of country Y, or vice versa.

They did it because they thought it important to save the lives of innocent people threatened by conflict.

That very few peacekeeping mandates have ever provided for the protection of civilians would have surprised and dismayed them.

Of course, the little appreciated truth of a Human Security agenda is that it takes money—a lot of money—to succeed,

not least to pay for the combat-capable ground forces on whom intervention to save lives depends.

In fact, that penny (no pun intended) hasn't really dropped yet, and not only in Canada.

Sometimes I have had the impression that Ottawa seemed to think that it was enough for Canada to be innovative diplomatically.

Ideas Were Us!

Muscles were someone else.

That said, the most recent budget has taken significant steps to give Canada the capability to put its money more often where its mouth is.

This subject is very much in the forefront of peoples' minds in Ottawa.

A special meeting is being convened tomorrow there to consider whether the Government of Canada should broaden its definition.

My advice was to broaden it enough to encompass natural disasters, terrorism and disease,

i.e., things that can kill you outright, rather than softer threats such as poverty, etc.

The norm of protection needs promotion for a while longer before we can risk broadening the agenda.