

Human security starts at home

By CHRISTOPHER HOBSON
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Japan has been one of the foremost proponents of a new way of understanding security that emerged in the 1990s. "Human security" is an approach which rejects the traditional prioritization of state security, and instead identifies the individual as the primary referent of security. It offers a way of broadening our perspective, and recognizing that the most pressing threats to individuals do not come from interstate war, but from the emergencies that affect people every day, such as famine, disease, displacement, civil conflict and environmental degradation. Human security is meant to entail "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want," a situation in which people can live their lives with dignity. Japan has actively sought to incorporate the human security doctrine into its foreign policy and championed it internationally.

Human security dovetails with Japan's approach to foreign affairs, which has been shaped by its pacifist constitution and its status as a middle power. It was perhaps not surprising that Japan was one of the first countries to support this new understanding of security, with Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama explicitly acknowledging the concept in 1995, and a few years later Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi announcing that it would play a guiding role in Japan's foreign policy. Japan initiated the establishment of the United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security, and has contributed the vast majority of its budget: a bill totalling ¥39 billion as of August 2009.

Japan also supported the Commission on Human Security, which was co-chaired by Sadako Ogata, former United Nations high commissioner for refugees and president of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Notably, human security was identified as a basic policy in the 2003 revision of Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charter. After this significant push in the 1990s and 2000s, human security has not been as prominent in Japan's foreign policy, but is still a central part of its ODA. And due to its early sponsorship of the concept, human security continues to be closely tied to Japan.

How has Japan's support for human security translated domestically? Like human rights, a fundamental feature of human security is its proclaimed universality. Nonetheless, Japan's adoption of the doctrine has been underwritten by a persistent assumption that it is something meant for other, less developed nations. Human security has been almost completely absent from the domestic political agenda. Obviously the kind of security threats faced by individuals will differ from country to country, but one of the aims of the human security doctrine is to identify these various threats in a context-sensitive manner. By ignoring the domestic relevance of human security, Japan has both undermined its advocacy of the concept and missed a useful opportunity to better comprehend some of the most pressing

challenges faced by its population.

The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami demonstrated with terrible force the applicability of the concerns of human security with freedom from fear and "freedom from want." In the immediate aftermath, continued aftershocks combined with the unfolding Fukushima nuclear disaster to create a climate of fear. Once these issues were stabilized those directly affected still had to deal with the great uncertainty about their future.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are a significant way of measuring human insecurity, and at one point there were over 300,000 IDPs in Tohoku. These people had to deal with basic but difficult questions: Where would they live? What would they do? Is it safe to return home? These issues directly link to issues of "want'." After the earthquake and tsunami the impacted region suffered from shortages of shelter, food, water and power. The quick response of the SDF, the U.S. military and other actors addressed these immediate threats, but during the longer-term rebuilding phase many people now face considerable uncertainty about their futures.

Given Japan's strong advocacy of human security abroad, it is striking how little the doctrine has been utilized in the ongoing recovery efforts. Japan has been a leader in regards to disaster preparation and response, and this has been incorporated into some of JICA's work on human security abroad. Directly extending this experience to recovery efforts at home is a logical step, which would also be opportunity to appreciate how human security has relevance for Japan's domestic policies, and not simply as garnish for its development assistance abroad.

Applying a human security approach is a powerful way of identifying threats to individuals, especially those that are most vulnerable, such as the elderly, women, children and the disabled. As Oxfam has explained, "natural disasters are profoundly discriminatory. Whenever they hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine how a community will be affected and who will pay the highest price." In this regard, it was notable that 65 percent of the March 11 disaster victims were aged 60 or older. Given Japan's graying population, properly dealing with the special needs of the elderly will be a vital part of responding any future disasters. Women are also disproportionately impacted, not only in terms of casualties, but also in the recovery process. It is common following such events for there to be a rise in domestic abuse. In learning the lessons of Tohoku a human security approach would draw attention to how existing vulnerabilities such as these are exacerbated by disasters, and how these can be better managed.

After the initial mobilization of resources and willpower in responding to the events of March 11, the transition to the longer-term process of reconstruction is proving particularly challenging. The Japanese government and public should not lose focus as the immediate memories of the disasters fade from our collective memory. The human security doctrine may have value in helping to direct and sustain rebuilding efforts. A fundamental component of human security, as announced and supported by Japan, is a strong emphasis on prevention.

As Japan rebuilds, it is vital that we do not try to return to the "normal" life of before. Doing so would simply recreate critical vulnerabilities and weaknesses that contributed to the original disaster. It is important not to

mistakenly identify the nuclear accident as a man-made disaster and the quake and tsunami as natural disasters. Rather, all three disasters were the result of nature interacting with human decisions and ways of living that created vulnerability and risk. Human security's concern with prevention, and its focus on the interconnected nature of threats, provides a perspective that encourages a more considered reconstruction process, one that avoids the trap of simply trying to rebuild what previously existed.

Japan's triple disasters showed how human security is not only an issue for less developed countries; it also has considerable relevance at home. As this country continues to deal with the difficult task of rebuilding after March 11, reflecting on the value and lessons of the human security doctrine for its own situation could be an important step towards creating a more secure Japan.

On Feb. 22, the United Nations University will host a public forum titled "11 March in context — Human security perspectives." A panel of international experts will explore the human consequences of March 11 in comparison with major natural disasters in other countries, and consider the uses of the human security approach in responding. unu.edu/events/2012/11-march-in-context.html

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