

The Relevance of the Local Level for Human Security

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This paper concentrates on defining the term “local level” and analyzing its relevance in the context of human security. For this purpose the characteristics of the concept of human security are being identified and examined in regard to their effect for the local level.

I. Introduction

Since the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report introduced the concept of human security, many contributions to this idea have been made from different approaches. Over the years, this development has led to the emergence of a wide range of human security definitions, primarily differing in defining the sensitive human values, the nature of threats¹ and the relation to already established concepts, like human development and human rights². Despite the differences among the various conceptions, a lowest common denominator can be identified in the endeavors to protect human beings from several threats by including new actors. This raises the general question of which new actors should be involved in these endeavors? Which people, communities, governmental and non-governmental institutions should play which role and to what extent? Spe-

¹ See Harvard Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research, Comparison of Human Security Definitions

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hpcr/events/hsworkshop/comparison_definitions.pdf> All websites occurring in this essay were last checked on 1 February 2004.

² For analyses of the relationship between human security and human rights or human development see inter alia: Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now*, Commission on Human Security, New York, 2002, at pp. 8-9; Hampson, F. O., *Madness in the Multitude: Human Security and World Disorder*, Oxford University Press, Canada, 2002, at pp. 18-23, at pp. 28-32; Oberleitner, Gerd, *Human Security and Human Rights*, ETC Occasional Paper Series, no. 8, 2002, at pp. 14-25

<<http://www.etc-graz.at/publikationen/Human%20Security%20occasional%20paper.pdf>>.

cifically, this prompts the discussion of the relevance of the local level for providing human security.

II. Approaching the term “local level”

Because of the absence of a common definition of the term “local level”, I will develop my own in the following paragraphs. However, because of space considerations, I will provide only a general outline omitting details irrelevant to the discussion.

Attempts to define the local level have to be based on considerations of its quantity, in terms of area size and population figures, and its quality, as is measured by structures. Soon it becomes evident that defining the local level in a global context using the quantity criterion faces the insurmountable obstacle of enormous variations within and between countries. One can find mega-cities (with their districts) and small towns, as well as rural communes and indigenous groups. Where should the line be drawn in terms of quantity? How can numbers take into account local characteristics, e.g. how can the indicator of area size be considerate of nomadic tribes?

It is more reasonable to take a closer look at the quality criterion, i.e. structures. Nearly every individual is embedded in infrastructures. What does infrastructure mean? Similar to the term “local level” there is no commonly accepted definition of infrastructure. But it is identifiable that almost every concept of infrastructure is military- or economy-oriented. Reimut Jochimsen was the first to try to systematize infrastructure³. He divides it into three categories: physical, institutional and personal infrastructure. Nevertheless, his approach is also purely centered on economic principals (e.g. personal infrastructure stands for human capital as a contribution to economic activity).

This approach is insufficient for defining the local level. Therefore, I will attempt to find my own approach, focusing on the individual in opposition to the military- or economy-orientation.

All over the world human beings are embedded in infrastructure: infrastructure offering something to the individual and infrastructure obliging the individual. I will call this “personal infrastructure”. The following rough classification represents types of “personal infrastructure”:

- *Human infrastructure*: individuals embedded in and interacting with e.g. families, kinship systems, indigenous groups, circles of friends, co-workers, business partners, neighborhoods etc.
- *Social infrastructure*: the availability of care (through family members, relatives, indigenous groups, governmental and non-governmental social

³ Jochimsen, R., *Theorie der Infrastruktur: Grundlagen der Marktwirtschaftlichen Entwicklung*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1966.

services etc.) or upbringing/education (through parents, friends, teachers etc.).

- *Technical infrastructure*: the existence of technical facilities, e.g. tools, shelter, weapons, water and sewage systems, roads, electricity, or telecommunication networks.
- *Economic infrastructure*: framework to exchange goods, services and information, whether based on barter or a monetary system.
- *Infrastructure of rules and rulings*: the existence of norms (social, religious and legal norms) and rulings (judgments, (political) decisions).

Borders of the above mentioned categories of personal infrastructure blur and should be seen as flexible. For example, health care is often part of human, social and technical infrastructure. Furthermore, the complex fields of religion and myth influence almost every person in a direct or an indirect (through the impact on cultures, which in turn influences individuals) way and are therefore a cross-cutting issue; likewise can be attributed to the environment.

The personal infrastructures illustrated above surround almost every individual; but it has to be emphasized, that their levels differ. In isolated indigenous groups personal infrastructure means something different than in urban areas, such as in Europe. Indigenous groups are typically based on unwritten customary rules and traditions such as kinship systems. On the other hand, Western societies, such as the ones found in Europe, are mainly characterized by the existence of positive law and distinct administration. Nevertheless, both societies provide the individual with personal infrastructure.

Because of my “people centered infrastructure approach”, which is similar to focusing on the individual in the concept of human security, it is possible that multiple degrees of infrastructure exist at the same time in the same place. Compare, for instance, the infrastructure of a recent migrant with the infrastructure of a native citizen: differences - especially in regard to human and social infrastructure - become obvious. Nevertheless, both individuals face personal infrastructure.

This leads me to the assumption that the local level is defined as the lowest level of personal infrastructure. The lowest level, on which the individual enjoys social, technical and economic infrastructure, is bound by norms and rulings and it interacts with the individual’s environment. By including people in various regions, a global approach can be deduced. The local level can be an indigenous group, a rural community, a small town, a district of a city, or a large city.

Whether a whole city or only a district thereof is considered to be the local level depends on the personal infrastructure provided. For example, if the lowest level of setting norms and giving out judgments is the urban borough, then this can be seen as the local level.

The local level defined through personal infrastructure provides the individual with the possibility of aggregating and articulating one's interests, of gaining information and support by formal or informal⁴ authorities, and of participating in formal or informal authorities' decision-making process. Only the infrastructural possibilities, rather than their actual realization are relevant to this definition.

III. The relevance of the local level for human security

A. *Examining the concept of human security*

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of human security is characterized by the focus on the individual, which should be protected from various threats through the involvement of new actors in managing this security process. The relevance of this new approach for the local level needs to be evaluated.

Firstly, human security focuses on the security of the individual human being, i.e. to protect people from various threats. These threats originate from different levels: global level (e.g. global warming, weapons of mass destruction), transnational level (e.g. transnational organized crime, international disputes), national level (e.g. corruption, state repression), regional level (e.g. economic underdevelopment, environmental degradation), and local level (e.g. child abuse, ethnic conflict). Many of these threats are not only limited to one level: For example dangers to people's security related to health can emanate from different levels.

Two unique characteristics can be attributed to threats at the local level. The first is that many threats exhibit their effects on the local level regardless of their origin. For instance, global warming affects the individual at the local level through altering vegetation or water supplies. The second characteristic is the heightened importance attributed to dangers that happen close to home.

As far as protecting individuals from various threats is concerned these observations indicate a greater importance of acting at the local level rather than at supra-local levels.

Secondly, the integration of non-state actors as a fundamental pillar to the protection of human security will result in strengthening the local level. Most NGOs and others in civil society operate locally. Including them in the process of enhancing human security demonstrates genuine concern for improving the process of collecting pertinent information and quickly reacting to threats. In short, this inclusion will signal the recognition of the local level.

⁴ For example, informal authorities can be the elderly in kinship systems of indigenous groups.

Thirdly, compared to the above-mentioned objective of human security, there are also other related concepts. *State security* aims to protect a country from external and internal factors, such as invasions or rebellions, threaten the monopoly of violence. *Human rights* intend to protect the individual from human rights violations⁵ by the own state as well as other states; I neglect the third party effect (i.e. the issue of non-state actors as perpetrators) as a controversial issue, which is at the most accepted in an indirect way (through the national legislator). *Human development* aims at removing various obstacles that restrain individuals from blossoming. Is the local level relevant for these established concepts?

In every one of these concepts, the local level plays a vital role. To curb the risk of threats from originating at the local level and to ensure security of the state, it is necessary for the state to secure its monopoly of violence. To prevent human rights abuses, strict human rights standards need to be implemented and enforced at the local level. And, finally, the efforts to guarantee and enhance human development need to originate from the local level, because most of the restrictions interfering with the complete individual development stem from local circumstances.

To which extent is the local level part of these concepts? By only involving governmental organisations (local authorities, local police authorities), state security excludes all non-state actors at the local level. But does this automatically mean less importance of the local area? What about totalitarian states and their systems of snitchers and informers operating in great quantities on the local level to enhance state security? Improving the situation of human rights and human development strongly depends on the work at the local level. As mentioned above, the local level is of great importance for protecting individuals. Does therefore the local level play a greater role in the concept of human security due to its focus on protection from threats? That is difficult to answer because averting threats has also always been a principal component of the different generations of human rights.

Briefly, what is the impact of these related concepts on human security? The primordial human security concept comes from the human development corner (UNDP Human Development Report 1994); a corner that has strongly been influenced by human rights in the past two decades. Human security can be seen as an attempt to bring in security attributes in order to protect humans from various dangerous threats. As Amartya Sen states, human security supplements human rights and human development⁶.

⁵ For the scope of human rights violations see the international legal human rights regime.

⁶ Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now*, Commission on Human Security, New York, 2002, at pp. 8-9.

Thus, human security is strongly influenced by underlying concepts that heavily rely on the local level. While this points out the importance of the local level for human security, it does not indicate a greater significance of the local level for human security than in the related, underlying concepts.

B. Differences among local levels in terms of human security

Briefly, I want to point out the relevance of the context of the local level for human security. The importance of the local level strongly depends on factors of personal infrastructure. Human, social, technical, economic and political factors affect not only the involvement of state- and non-state actors in the human security process, but also determine the types and numbers of possible threats. For example, Marie Jahoda, Hans Zeisel, and Paul F. Lazarsfeld concluded in their famous study, titled “The Unemployed of Marienthal”⁷, that unemployment leads to resignation; i.e. economic factors influence the engagement in, for example, NGOs. Another example would be dictatorships, which cause local repression in many ways; i.e. political factors shape the scenario of threats.

But general conclusions about consequences arising out of these various factors can not be derived. The existence of a dictatorship, for instance, states nothing about the quality of a health system, i.e. possible threats emerging from an inadequate health system.

IV. Conclusion

The local level is of great importance for the enhancement of human security. As threats predominantly show their effect on the local level, averting dangers in a more efficient and effective way is easier at the local level. The degree of its importance depends on the various factors influencing the human being. Furthermore it is questionable whether the local level plays a more important part in human security than in other related concepts, like human rights or human development.

⁷ Jahoda, M., Zeisel, H., Lazarsfeld, P. F., *Marienthal: the Sociography of an Unemployed Community*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 2002.