

Human security in the Pacific: A personal reflection

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Human security is defined as a holistic approach in dealing with the whole range of threats that affect individuals and communities. In this sense it means achieving freedom from want and freedom from fear. Freedom from want is mainly achieved through employment and meaningful livelihoods and can exist when people are able to meet all their basic needs including food and shelter as well as access education, health and social security services provisioned by the state. Freedom from fear means that they are protected from crime and violence, intrusive and predatory actions of the state, and are able to participate in decision-making bodies and freely choose representatives to those bodies. Human security therefore encapsulates the elimination of poverty and the empowerment of people to demand and take pro-active measures to keep their communities safe.

Pacific island communities have survived and sustained themselves over several millennia by giving due regard to the multiple dimensions of what is being conceptualised as 'human security'. With the integration into the world economy brought about by colonialism and more recently, globalisation, the challenges to human security have significantly increased and become more complex. There are many internal and external threats to human security and external factors can generate internal changes that may have significant consequences for a Pacific Island country (PIC).

Security threats in PICs

Conflicts in a number of island states has arisen over the use of local resources for 'national development' in a less than transparent and equitable manner; the presence of strangers in territories claimed by resident indigenous groups; competition over land and jobs; the destruction of natural habitats for subsistence livelihoods; the lack of participation by local communities in making decisions about the use of their resources; and the use of repressive measures by state power holders against those who protested their legitimate concerns. Most PICs are variously subject to a full range of natural hazards such as cyclones, droughts, flooding and tidal surges, earthquakes, and tsunamis as well as volcanic activity. Three different vulnerability indexes show that PICs and other small island states are amongst the top 30 of the most vulnerable of 111 countries. 'Vanuatu is ranked the most vulnerable of any of the 111 states; Tonga is third, Fiji eighth, the Solomon Islands eleventh, Samoa twentieth, Papua New Guinea thirtieth, and Kiribati fifty ninth....' (Brindley 2004:23).

Economic insecurity: As very small and non-competitive producers of raw materials, PICs are extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in commodity prices. Most are heavily dependent on one or two commodities. They are price takers rather than price makers and producers of much that they do not consume and consumers of much that they do not

produce. Human capital loss is a major concern for some countries.

For much of the last two decades PICs have experienced stagnating and even periodically declining rates of economic growth, although on per capita terms, a number of countries and the region as a whole have received very large amounts of development assistance.

Despite the size of these aid flows, real per capita growth rates over the period have been disappointing. The average for the Pacific over the 20 year period to 2001 was 0.8 per cent per annum, compared to 1.1 per cent for the rest of the world. The last decade has been even worse, with the Pacific averaging a contraction of 0.1 per year, compared to the world average of 1.4 per cent growth (Brindley, 2004:4).¹

Agriculture, most especially subsistence agriculture, is regarded as posing a considerable impediment to economic growth. In virtually all PICs, customary forms of land tenure are intimately bound up with small-holder production. Customary land tenure is perceived as a major block to increased productivity as group ownership does not allow land to be used as collateral in securing bank loans for investment in equipment, fertiliser and pesticides. Moreover, investments in other areas such as tourism, housing, renewable energy, and waste disposal are seen as being unnecessarily stalled by land not being a factor of production that can be bought and sold in the market. However, it is also widely recognised that without the access that most islanders have to plots of cultivable land guaranteed by their membership of land-owning groups, poverty levels would be much higher.²

Natural and man-made insecurities: In addition to economic vulnerability and natural hazards, 'man made' disasters abound. These include lack of accountability by state power holders, serious shortcomings in the rule of law, public finance mismanagement, outright corruption and military intervention in democratic processes. In a number of the largest countries, security forces have become the primary sources of insecurity.³ Poor leadership and lack of vision and appropriate public policies together with the processes of peripheral capitalism have led to growing social inequality and poverty. In the larger PICs, significant numbers of children do not attend schools due to a lack of affordability and accessibility. The lack of opportunities for gainful employment and amenities for recreational activities have spawned counter cultures of delinquency, crime and drug abuse amongst unemployed young men and women. Sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS have become widespread. In addition to the existing pandemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in PICs, COVID-19 is now affecting people in numerous ways. Tourism and remittance dependent PICs have been seriously impacted by near complete curtailment of international flights, the

abrupt end to tourism and the loss of employment for thousands of workers engaged in tourism and related sectors. Fortunately, PICs' governments acted quickly to close their borders, limiting the spread of the virus.

Human insecurity: Another extremely negative social phenomenon has arisen as the result of the COVID-19 lockdowns and loss of employment and livelihoods: domestic violence and violence against women and children, already widespread in the region, has increased significantly. Numerous cases of battered women and the violent deaths of women at the hands of intimate partners have been reported in Fiji and PNG. Violence has also been prevalent historically, and lurks below the surface in disputes over land, inter-tribal competition, family disputes, and even in sports. These can be fuelled by alcohol and other drugs. In PNG, Bougainville and the Solomon Islands, weapons, including guns, have aggravated injuries and mortalities in conflicts between groups and idle young men have provided the foot soldiers for unscrupulous leaders in their bid for political ascendancy in Fiji, PNG, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

Environmental insecurity: Global warming continues to have a disproportionate effect on atoll states such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tuvalu where saltwater intrusion is increasing – the partial consequences of activities in the industrialised world. Climate change has had consequences for all island countries further reducing the ability of their populations to literally keep their heads above water. Extreme weather events such as Cyclone Winston, Cyclone Pam, Cyclone Gita, and Cyclone Harold have devastated a number of PICs. Fiji experienced an economic downturn of 20 per cent of GDP after Cyclone Winston in 2016. The estimated damage caused by Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu a year earlier was equivalent to 64 per cent of its GDP. Nearly 38 per cent of Tonga's GDP was lost as a result of Cyclone Gita in 2018. In the midst of the emerging threats posed by COVID-19, in April 2020, Tropical Cyclone Harold destroyed agricultural livelihoods, homes and infrastructure estimated at 65 per cent of Vanuatu's GDP. Cyclone Harold also caused serious destruction in Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Fiji. Development advances and improved living standards are destroyed by these extreme weather events, and affected PICs have to start from scratch, again and again.

These natural, socio-cultural, economic and political problems and hazards comprise the security threats that can, and do, affect human development and human security in PICs. To combat these threats the 'human security framework', which is an integrated approach based on partnerships between civil society organisations, states, and regional/international institutions, is intended to provide a comprehensive safeguard that seeks to empower local peoples.

From State security to human security

This new partnership approach to human security is a significant paradigm shift from the state-centric model of security that has emerged over the last few decades. In this approach, security was defined narrowly as threats to the

survival of the state. These threats were perceived as being mainly external and included cross-border issues, possible military invasion, fish poaching in territorial waters, drugs and human trafficking. Since 9/11 there has been a pre-occupation with terrorism, heightened securitisation of the state, and international aid donors refocusing aid towards military and police assistance.

Political instability was considered a significant internal threat to the state, leading to harsh crackdowns on advocates of human rights and social justice. The human security paradigm sees security much more broadly as the survival and safety of people and their communities.

Human security is concerned with safeguarding and expanding people's vital freedoms. It requires both shielding people from acute threats and empowering them to make changes of their own lives. Needed are integrated policies that focus on people's survival, livelihood and dignity, during downturns as well as prosperity (UN Commission on Human Security, 2003:iv).

The Pacific Plan (2005) accepted this broader notion of security as 'the stable and safe social (or human) and political conditions necessary for, and reflective of, good governance and sustainable development...' The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) compiled two security frameworks within its regional integration program to address Pacific leaders' vision of 'a region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity to allow our people to lead free, healthy and productive lives' (Pacific Islands Forum 2016).

While the Security Sector Governance Framework focused primarily on state institutions, all security institutions have the responsibility to support human rights. In the global context this is recognised through the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Providers, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the Montreux Document. The Secretariat developed the UN Human Security Framework (2016) to provide a clear common foundation and strategic guidance to Forum Island Countries and stakeholders for improving the understanding, planning and implementation of human security approaches in stand-alone and broader peace, security and development initiatives for the region.

The Human Security Framework provides a common language and sound basis for discussions, planning and implementation of human security initiatives. It is also a tool for communicating to partners and governments inside and outside the region as to what the common understanding of human security is by Forum member countries (Deputy Secretary General, PIFS Andie Fong Toy, 2016).⁴

The Human Security Framework

Civil society organisations: The human security framework recognises that human security requires an integrated approach that brings together civil society and the state. CSOs comprise the more traditional community and faith-based entities, NGOs, business groups, trade unions, ethnic and cultural associations. Their role in social, economic, political, and environmental spheres cannot be over-estimated. CSOs are involved in food security and

livelihood related activities, they provide education, health and social services as well as seek sustainable development. They settle disputes, mediate and resolve conflict and contribute positively to peace building. The work of civil society groups enhances social capital.

When men, women and children are more informed about all aspects of human security, their rights and responsibilities and their entitlements as citizens, they are likely as individuals and as members of CSOs to take initiatives to protect themselves from threats and make informed choices regarding their human security. They are better able to hold leaders at all levels to account on their security. CSOs are well placed to mobilise people and resources to enhance safety and security. This has been evident in PICs as individuals, youth groups, women's movements, community, and faith-based organisations together with international NGOs and partners have mobilised to support people affected by COVID-19.

In summary therefore, CSOs can play vital roles in generating, promoting, maintaining and taking action on information and action programs to enhance human security by themselves and as a valued partner of state institutions and development agencies. It is imperative that Forum island governments individually and collectively recognise the role that CSOs have played in protecting and promoting Pacific communities from security threats. This recognition should be accompanied by a willingness to engage in dialogue with CSO representatives in an equitable and open manner. CSOs must be accepted as partners in the work of governments and at the regional level CSO representatives should be effectively represented when decisions are made about human security matters. They need to be involved in the implementation, assessment, and monitoring of projects and programs relating to improving the security of people and communities.

Governance: The Biketawa Declaration committed Forum Islands governments to good governance defined as being open and transparent, protecting the rights of citizens as well as upholding democratic processes and institutions. These guiding principles provide the bases for the formulation and implementation of public policies that are responsive to the needs of citizens and are equitable. Institutions that effectively provide public goods, promote rule of law and expand physical infrastructure in an open, accountable and inclusive way promote the environment for human development, respect for human rights and increase the capacity of all to actively pursue human security goals.

Reconciliation and peacebuilding: To some extent tension and conflicts are part of human existence and there are routine and established modes of channeling and resolving these stresses in societies. In recent times however, there have been overt and violent conflicts that have unraveled the social fabric of communities. Post-conflict peacebuilding can easily be jeopardised without attendance to the root causes of the conflict, and building confidence and trust within and between individuals and groups involved. The process of reconciliation requires active participation of CSOs, especially recognising and

supporting the role of women as peace-makers. There are several steps in the reconciliation process: first, the preparedness of the parties involved in the conflict to accept their part in generating and aggravating the antagonism. Second, there must be a willingness to make reparations for the harm done to others. Third, being prepared to dialogue honestly on how to deal with the root causes of the conflict. Fourth, being prepared to participate in peace building activities that bring together the former conflicting groups.

Law and justice systems: Legal and justice systems in the PICs involve both indigenous institutions and the colonially inherited 'western system'. Many rural and remote communities as well as urban informal settlements continue to use values and norms that reflect customary systems. There is an emphasis on 'restorative justice' and rebuilding relationships between the aggrieved person's family/community and those of the offenders. The arrangements are better understood, more easily accessible and are generally not overly expensive. The exception to this observation is the huge inflation in compensation payments required in the Southern Highlands Province of PNG. Additionally, the resolution of certain types of crime such as rape in the customary system may not be adequate as a satisfactory remedy for victims. However, the growing number of crimes, increasing numbers in prison and the heightened sense of insecurity in urban areas provide evidence that the existing 'western' system is not working. There are issues of whether the punishment fits the crime, especially for first offenders, the treatment of juvenile delinquents, the rehabilitation of prisoners, support for their families, support for the victims of crime, and recidivism.

Society and cultures: In recent decades there have been significant social transformation of kinship in small communities, but traditional values and institutions have continued to exist. In several instances, significantly valued cultural institutions are recognised in PICs' constitutions. Customary ownership of land and its inalienability are entrenched in a number of constitutions as is the role of chiefs and persons of rank. The Biketawa Declaration recognises 'the importance of respecting and protecting indigenous rights and cultural values, traditions and customs.' Additionally, there is a need to ensure that languages of communities are taught to its younger members as this is most likely path to maintaining the integrity of Pacific island cultures. There is a danger, however, that the wholesale acceptance of traditional rights, values, traditions and customs will have negative impacts on women, youth and children. The latter tend not to have much say in traditional decision-making fora. Besides, there are likely to be serious violations of human rights if 'customary' sanctions against non-conforming members of society are enforced.

Livelihoods and poverty: A fundamental challenge for PICs will be to ensure meaningful livelihoods and employment for their people. Increasing social inequality has been accompanied by a growing number of people, especially young persons, without jobs or access to other livelihoods. Rural-urban disparities have grown, and ever larger

numbers are eking a living below the poverty line. An Asian Development Bank study on poverty and hardship in the region confirmed what CSO representatives had been saying about the extent of poverty in PICs. Cook Islands had 12 per cent of its people living below the poverty line; all the Melanesian countries had poverty level ranging from 30 to 40 per cent; and in Kiribati half the population were found to live in poverty. Gross social inequality and poverty often lead to social exclusion, unrest and political instability. The youngest and oldest segments of society are most vulnerable to economic exclusion.

There is a need to expand economic activities, increase food security, generate employment, and ensure greater access to resources and opportunities. Cultural norms of reciprocity and sharing with the wider kinship group are being replaced by values that are linked to urban living and the monetary economy. Civil society organisations can work with local communities to identify and generate new economic opportunities. They can establish self-help groups and secure micro-finance for cash earning activities. They can work with families, young mothers, women and youth to build their capacity by the provision of information and training. CSOs can also play a significant advocacy role to influence pro-poor growth policies.

Land, resources, and the environment: Natural resource use, conservation and management is at the heart of human security. Land is often utilised inefficiently and under increasing pressure from population growth, leading to it becoming a major source of competition, tension and conflict. Extractive industries such as logging, mining and fishing have seriously depleted forest cover, degraded natural environments, and affected people's livelihoods. CSOs have a critical role to give voice to the concerns of local communities about the degradation of their environment, loss of biodiversity and the loss of livelihoods. In the long-term this will reduce conflict and support sustainable development.

Education and awareness for reducing violence: In multi-ethnic and multi-lingual PICs, nation building remains a challenge. In addition to the issue of violence, suicides are also uncommonly high in some countries of the region. Education can play an important role in combatting this. School curriculums need to focus on local content that deals with history, origins of different groups, their cultures, language studies, multiculturalism, explanations about migration and resource competition in order to help increase understanding and tolerance. This can also be supported by greater cooperation with CSOs as well as zero-tolerance for violence in schools, respect for the sanctity of the person, and gender equality, all of which can begin the process of changing attitudes and behaviour in wider society.

Tackling misuse of arms: Fortunately for the region, the civilian population and police forces remain largely unarmed. Small arms including combat weapons such as assault rifles, machine guns and automatic pistols are limited to areas that have experienced open violent conflict. Bougainville, Guadalcanal, and the PNG Southern Highlands have suffered significant casualties from the use of small

arms. Recent participatory studies have illustrated increases in violence linked to these weapons. Livelihoods and lives have been lost and communities are keen to see an end to gun violence. CSOs can help educate people about the negative consequences of gun use, identify the factors that contribute to gun violence and work towards the phasing out of guns from communities.

HIV/AIDS and homophobia: HIV/Aids has been increasing in PICs. The common risk factors are a large number of young people in the population, high levels of STDs, teenage pregnancies, and the tendency to have unprotected sex with multiple partners. There are many challenges to individuals and communities that range from tackling ignorance about STDs and HIV/AIDS, monitoring infections, treatment and the attitude of the wider community members to HIV/AIDS positive persons. Homophobia, moral judgement, and fear affect how infected persons are treated by communities. CSOs are already playing a significant role in partnership with governments and multilateral agencies to advocate and educate for greater health services and security.

Conclusion

While there has been continued preoccupation with the securitisation of the state, human security has emerged as a transformative concept and framework. Through this concept, a more partner-centred approach between security actors is continuing to evolve. CSOs are already engaged in creating awareness of risks relating to health for instance, and tackling many of the threats to human security. Groups of youth, women, environmental and human rights activists have been educating and advocating about a range of issues that impinge on people and communities in the region. With the shift towards an integrated holistic approach to human security, they can be a portent partner to the state, regional and international development agencies in ensuring safer and secure communities. Their potential will be enhanced by the recognition of the work that they are currently doing, treating them as equal partners, making resources available to them and helping them to build their capacity.

Notes

* This paper is an updated version of an earlier presentation to the Workshop on Civil Society and Human Security, UNDP Pacific Centre and Citizens Constitutional Forum, at the Tokatoka Resort, Nadi. 25-26 April, 2007

- 1 The heavily remittance dependent economies of Samoa and Tonga have experienced growth. Samoa has engaged in the reform process most consistently and has shown annual growth rates over the last five years.
- 2 Some Pacific experts continue to subscribe to the notion of 'subsistence affluence' which in my view was not equally present in all PICs and in any case raises the issue of what is defined as affluence.
- 3 The ethnically exclusive Fijian military has engaged in four military coups undermining democratic electoral outcomes; the Solomon Island police were involved in the 2000 coup which overthrew Prime Minister Bart Ulufa'alu's government; the Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu security forces have mutinied periodically.

- ⁴ <https://www.forumsec.org/2016/05/23/deputy-secretary-general-andie-fong-toys-opening-remarks-at-the-workshop-on-mapping-of-private-security-in-the-pacific-islands-region/> Accessed 1 September, 2020.

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