

WHY HUMAN SECURITY?

Amartya Sen

Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and
Lamont University Professor Emeritus, Harvard University

Text of presentation at the "International Symposium on Human Security"
in Tokyo, 28 July, 2000.

WHY HUMAN SECURITY?

Amartya Sen

What is human security? And why is it important? These are natural questions to ask as we begin this "International Symposium on Human Security." I want to start off from an insightful observation that Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo made in a keynote address to another conference, the first "Intellectual Dialogue on Building Asia's Tomorrow," which was held nearly two years ago.ⁱ Obuchi said: "It is my deepest belief that human beings should be able to lead lives of creativity, without having their survival threatened or their dignity impaired." It is in this context that he invoked the idea of "human security," describing it as "the keyword to comprehensively seizing all of the menaces that threaten the survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings and to strengthening the efforts to confront these threats." I would argue that Obuchi's diagnosis and its far-reaching implications provide a good beginning for this international symposium on human security.

In this talk I would like to examine and extend the ideas that Obuchi was invoking. In particular, I would like to comment on some specific aspects of this approach, which derive directly from Obuchi's concentration on "survival, daily life, and dignity of human beings."

Anxiety about these diverse concerns have troubled humanity throughout its history, and it may well be wondered what is the reason for thinking that this is a particularly apt moment to confront these issues. We must, therefore, answer two different questions: "why these issues?" and "why now?"

Security of Survival: Health, Peace and Tolerance

The particular reasons for trying to make a concerted effort precisely at this time are both negative and positive. The negative reasons include the fact that each of these problems have received some set-back in recent years from newly developing dangers and adversities, and these call for specific engagement right now. For example, the prospects of survival have been made less favourable in many parts of the world through problems in public health, including the emergence and spread of particular diseases, such as AIDS, new types of malaria, drug-resistant T.B., and so on. Similarly, in the growing persistence and sometimes accentuation of civil wars and associated killings, there is a continuing and worsening threat to survival of civilians caught in the battle of armies and in sectarian genocide or persecution. Sadako Ogata, who is here, has had to deal with the vast refugee problems that are associated with many of these terrible events.

On the positive side, however, there is an enhanced possibility in the contemporary world to put our efforts and understanding together to achieve a better coordinated resistance to the forces that make human survival so insecure. We live in a world that is not only full of dangers and threats, but also one where the nature of the adversities are better understood, the scientific advances are more firm, and economic and social assets that can counter these menaces are more extensive. Not only do we have more problems to face, we also have more opportunities to deal with them.

Daily Life and the Quality of Living

Similar points can be made about the other two concerns captured in Obuchi's visionary phrase. For example, despite the fact that the economic progress of East and South-east Asia had been very rapid for many decades, and notwithstanding the fact that daily lives in the region did improve in many different ways, the danger of a downturn affecting the lives of hundreds of million also remained firmly present (even if concealed in the euphoria associated with high and seemingly invulnerable growth rates). When the Asian economic crisis came, the potential danger - already present - became manifest and fierce, and it ravaged the daily lives of people who had earlier felt falsely secure.

On the other side, however, this experience itself has taught the world many different things which can now be put to use in a concerted promotion of security of daily life. Along with the old slogan of "growth with equity" we also need a new commitment towards "downturn with security," given the fact that occasional downturns are common - possibly inescapable - in market economies. In achieving security under these circumstances, and in trying to guarantee secure daily living in general, we need social and economic provisions (for example, for so-called "economic safety nets" and the guaranteeing of basic education and health care), but also political participation, especially by the weak and the vulnerable, since their voice is vitally important. This requires the establishment and efficient working of democracies with regular elections and the tolerance of opposition, but also the cultivation of a culture of open public discussion. Democratic participation can

directly enhance security through supporting human dignity (more on this presently), but they also help in securing the continuation of daily lives (despite downturns) and even the security of survival (through the prevention of famines).ⁱⁱ

The need to confront insecurity of daily lives may arise in other ways as well. When the victims remain severely deprived not because of an economic downturn, but because of persistent neglect of social and economic institutions (such as schools, hospitals, etc.) on a chronic basis, what is needed is a better understanding of the failure of governance involved in these long-term lacunae and a greater determination to make provisions for these vital necessities. Given the globalised nature of politics and public discussion in the contemporary world, this is a matter for international initiative as well as for national and local leadership.

Information and Ecology

The role of information technology and communicational revolution must be considered in this context, since they are among the major sources of strength in improving the quality of living across the world. And yet access to the new technology is severely limited not only through economic penury, but also through educational inadequacy. It is important that efforts - global as well as local - be made to improve and increase the access to these new opportunities that can radically transform human lives.

When we shift our attention from the positive merits of information

technology to the negative dangers of ecological neglect, we find a different type of adversity. The preservation of the global environment demands particular attention from those who tend to make the biggest contribution to the fouling of our air, water, temperature balance, and other implicit sources of secure and happy living - now and in the future.

The richer countries are particularly in a position to make a difference in this respect (given the size of their consumption), but even developing economies can have a significant influence - increasing more so, as the process of economic development proceeds. Since alterations of designs and technical forms can be expensive once they become widely used, the need to think about the future is a contemporary necessity. Also, the local environment can be very important for the quality of life in a particular region, and it can certainly be severely damaged through territorial neglect.

The need to pay attention to ecological and environmental concerns applies to all countries - rich and poor. Since ecological irresponsibility is, at least partly, a matter of ignorance (smugness can be generated by unawareness and not just by a perverse unconcern), there is a potentially constructive linkage between informational access and ecological responsibility.

Dignity, Equity and Solidarity

Human dignity - to turn to Obuchi's third concern - also faces some new threats today, in addition to old ones that tended to make the lives of so many people so honourless and low over the millennia. For example,

just as women's movements have grown and made substantial progress in helping to achieve gender equity in many different societies (attempting to counter long-standing inequities), there has also been resistance to these changes from supporters of traditional inequalities (indeed often from beneficiaries of privileges that inequality gives to some at the expense of many others). There has often been, as a result, stagnation in the reversal of inequities, and in some cases, even regression. The most extreme cases of regression may even involve the closing of schools for girls, the raping of helpless and victimized women, and other atrocities.

Indignities of other kinds - related to class, caste, ethnicity, social opportunity, economic resources - also call for clearer recognition. Development is not only about the growth of GNP per head, but also about the expansion of human freedom and dignity.ⁱⁱⁱ Indignities can survive both through omission and commission, and they have to be addressed in a comprehensive way.

Globalization and a Global Commitment

There are, happily, many different signs that can be seen right now which point to a growing commitment across the world to confront inequality and insecurity with greater global solidarity. The commitment may find "official" expression in the work of international bodies, or "anti-official" expression in street protests that criticize the role of one international body or another. But there can be little doubt that in the contemporary world, there is more engagement than ever before to

look broadly and jointly at international and global problems. Even protests against globalization themselves now take a globalised form - with protesters gathering in Seattle or Washington, D.C., from many different corners of the world. There are differences in outlook and analyses, but we must not miss the commendable unanimity of concern that moves people today beyond their local preoccupations into world issues (sans frontieres), even though they may not - and do not - individually agree on how these issues should be addressed.

The subject of globalization itself arouses passion - both in defence and in opposition. It is not, of course, a new phenomenon. Over thousands of years, globalization has shaped the progress of the world, through trade, travel, migration, and dissemination of knowledge. The opposite of globalization is persistent separatism and relentless autarky. There is a terrifying image of seclusion that has been invoked, as a warning, in many old Sanskrit texts in India (I know of four such texts, beginning from about two and a half thousand years ago). This is the story of what is called "kupamanduka" (in Sanskrit) or the well-frog - a frog that lives its entire life within a well and is suspicious of everything outside it. The scientific, cultural and economic history of the world would have been very limited had we lived like well-frogs. This remains an important issue, since there are plenty of well-frogs around - and also attorneys of well-frogs.

The benefits of global contact and interaction applies to economic relations, among other relations. The economic predicament of the poor across the world cannot be reversed by withholding from them the great

advantages of contemporary technology (including of course information technology), the well-established efficiency of international trade and exchange, and the social as well as economic merits of living in open rather than closed societies. There is the twin danger of "unfair inclusion" on one side and "exclusion" on the other. It is right to be worried about sweated labour and the unusual power of multinational corporations. But just a withdrawal of global investment would not remove the economic adversities that the poor face in being excluded from economic and social opportunities that the more privileged enjoy.

International Arrangements and Global Architecture

The distribution of global benefits from economic and technological intercourse depends, among other things, on a variety of international arrangements, including trade agreements, patent laws, global health initiatives, international educational provisions, facilities for technological dissemination, ecological and environmental restraints, fair treatment of accumulated debts (often incurred by irresponsible military rulers of the past), and the management of conflicts, local wars and global spending on armament.

The financial architecture of the world that we have inherited from the past includes the World Bank, the I.M.F., the W.T.O., and other institutions. This institutional architecture was largely set up in the middle 1940s (only the W.T.O. was added later), following the Bretton Woods Conference held just as the second world war was coming to an end.

The framework responded to what were seen at that time as the big problems

of the world. But the world was very different then from what it is now, with the bulk of Asia and Africa still under imperialist dominance, and with quite a different international balance of powers and concerns.

There is now much greater understanding of the huge global prospects of human rights, including democracy, social equity and women's empowerment. Also, many NGOs - Medecins sans Frontieres, OXFAM, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others - have been able to draw the world's attention on issues of poverty and insecurity in a way that hardly any NGO could fifty years ago. (Since I am also the Honorary President of OXFAM, I should perhaps hesitate in praising the role of these major NGOs, since I could be accused of self-promotion, but I do believe an objective analysis points inescapably to the important contribution that these NGOs make to global thinking as well as global action.)

We need to go well beyond the international framework of Bretton Woods, both through redefining the old institutions (as is happening to a significant extent already in the World Bank under James Wolfensohn's leadership, particularly with his "comprehensive development framework"), and through having additional avenues for strengthening the demands of human security (whether a specific institution is needed for this is a matter for examination). The role of the United Nations in this global initiative is itself an important issue, and this links with the ideas that Secretary General Kofi Annan has already expressed on these issues.^{iv}

The Task and the Legacy

When Keizo Obuchi died last May, The Nation - a principal daily of Thailand and indeed one of the major voices of informed reason in the world of journalism - published an editorial which began by noting: "The vacuum created by the unexpected death of the Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi will be felt throughout Asia." The headline of the editorial was: "Obuchi left a lasting legacy."^v Nowhere is this legacy stronger than in the determination that Obuchi expressed to address the many-sided problems of human insecurity. There is much to be done.

NOTES

i.. Obuchi Keizo, "Opening Remarks," in The Asian Crisis and Human Security (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 1999), pp. 18-9.

ii.. These and related interconnections have been discussed in my Development as Freedom (New York: Knopf, and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

iii.. These issues are further investigated in Development as Freedom.

iv.. Kofi Annan, "We the People: The Role of the United Nations in the Twenty-first Century," United Nations, New York, 2000.

v.. The Nation. May 16, 2000, page A4.