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Should Canada Revisit the Human Security Agenda?

by Michael Small
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The trajectory of Canada's human security agenda could briefly be described as follows. It became the defining doctrine of Canada's foreign policy by the second half of Lloyd Axworthy's tenure as Foreign Minister from 1996-2000. It continued to evolve under subsequent Liberal Foreign Ministers, despite their uneven personal interest in it, due largely to the bureaucratic and diplomatic momentum inherited from Axworthy. However, once the Conservatives were elected in 2006, the terminology was shelved, the funding slashed and Canada dropped out of sight internationally as a promoter of the concept.¹

The return in October 2015 of a Liberal government that is proud of its forbearers and is eager to recommit to international institutions now makes it worthwhile to look back to the era just before 9/11 and ask a few questions. What did the original human security agenda accomplish of lasting value? Is there an appetite today for a '2.0' edition of Canada's human security agenda? If so, what should it look like? If not, what if anything should take its place?

Essentially, the human security agenda was a shift in 'the angle of vision' away from a state-centric vision of security to one that placed the security of people at the heart of foreign policy. In the Canadian formulation of the concept, human security is advanced by protecting people from violent threats to their safety, their rights or their livelihoods.² It brought together under one conceptual framework issues which had previously been regarded as discrete domains of foreign policy: arms control, human rights, humanitarian affairs, peace operations, international justice and democratic governance. Many of the issues on the agenda were longstanding but had acquired new urgency due to the prevalence in intrastate conflict and state failure in the 1990s. What was common to all of them was that they involved threats to the security of people that their own governments would not or could not control.

By mid-2000, Canada's human security agenda was officially organized around five discrete themes and 22 different issues.³ New issues were added as new threats and opportunities emerged. While some progress was made on all them, the most striking successes for Canada were: the Ottawa Treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines; the Rome Treaty establishing the International Criminal Court; the two Canadian-sponsored Security Council resolutions mandating the protection of civilians in all United Nations (UN) peace operations; and the Canadian sponsored and funded International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) which launched the concept of the Responsibility to Protect that was adopted by the General Assembly in the UN reform package of 2006.

What were the ingredients for its success?

First, there was a Minister who was personally committed to this ambitious and unconventional agenda and willing to push it at every opportunity, in the face of considerable skepticism from within his department and active resistance from a number of states, including on many issues the United States. There were naturally failures and misfires, but in pursuing this agenda, Canada was willing to be ahead of the curve on many issues, rather than constantly checking to be sure it was always in 'good company.'

Second, the idea of human security was novel yet in tune with the times. It addressed head-on the fact that intrastate conflicts were the dominant security challenge in the first decade after the Cold War and provided a new way of thinking about them and addressing them. It also benefited from the fact that the 1990s was a decade of sharply reduced risk of interstate conflict.



Third, a people-centred, normative agenda was well suited for advocacy by a middle power like Canada. It proved attractive to a wide range of other small to middle powers, cutting across more conventional international divides. It attracted support from a diverse range of influential international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – and indeed made working with these constructive non-state actors a hallmark of Canada’s human security diplomacy.⁴

Fourth, human security embraced and updated longstanding Canadian foreign policy commitments to peacekeeping and human rights. Thus it captured the imagination of many Canadians, even if much of the terminology was unfamiliar and many Canadian commentators were dismissive of it.

Fifth, the human security agenda was grounded in the belief that ideas matter in foreign policy and that to have international influence it is important to invest in them. By allocating \$10 million to create a Human Security Program, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) was able to invest in cutting-edge, idea-driven initiatives led by Canadian and international NGOs, working in concert with international organizations.



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Turning to the world in 2016, is there an appetite for Canada to promote a new version of the human security agenda? What are the arguments for and against?

On the ‘for’ side of the ledger, there is no shortage of people around the world in precarious situations in need of greater protection. The core issues of the human security agenda of the 1990s are at least as pressing today as they were then. So there remains plenty of work to do.



Canada's public service, military and civil society are also better prepared today to tackle these issues in a coherent way than they were in the 1990s. The creation of the Stabilization and Reconstruction program (START) in 2005 enabled DFAIT to fund large-scale initiatives in conflict-affected countries in political and security sectors that fell outside the development priorities of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Canada's long involvement in Afghanistan taught us what is required to manage coherent 3-D (defence, diplomacy, development) operations in a country in a severe and protracted conflict. The amalgamation of DFAIT and CIDA in 2013 created a much more coherent single department, now called the Department of Global Affairs, than the divided and often competing departments in Axworthy's day. An effective human security agenda needs to use all the tools of diplomacy, development, defence and international trade in an integrated way. Canada's capacity to do so is much higher today.

On the 'against' side of the ledger, the risks of interstate conflict are far higher today than they were in the 1990s, given a resurgent and unrepentant Russia and the rise to great power status of China which is now ready to contest the existing security order in Asia. North Korea becomes more dangerous by the month. The human security agenda offers no solutions in dealing with these kinds of classic state-centred security problems. And unlike the 1990s, Canada cannot largely leave the management of these threats to its allies, while it attends to problems more suited to its modest capabilities and limited willingness to pay. The reality of state-centred hard security threats does not trump the need to attend to human security challenges. But they necessarily compete for scarce political attention, diplomatic capacity and financial resources.

Furthermore, while it is possible to construct a human security approach to dealing with terrorism, based around addressing root causes of violent extremism, groups like Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) operate completely outside any normative framework that we recognize. The tools and methods of human security offer at best a partial response to the security threats posed by these terrorist groups and their sympathizers.

Finally, as a matter of diplomatic and political 'spin,' human security is no longer novel. The term has now become commonplace in multilateral discourse. Some of its norms (especially around protection of civilians) are now well established in UN doctrine. And other countries, notably Japan, have proven to be much more consistent champions of the concept over the past 16 years than Canada. Showing up on the world stage and announcing Canada just rediscovered something it had forgotten a decade ago, while the rest of the world has been getting on with implementing the concept, is not likely to impress anyone.

So how does Canada square opportunity and need with a realistic appreciation that times have changed – largely for the worse – and Canada can't afford a nostalgic reprise of the greatest hits of the 1990s?

Start by recognizing that there is a hunger for a thoughtful Canadian foreign policy agenda that takes a large view of the world but which also makes some choices about where to place our discretionary efforts. That does not require adopting all the same priorities as the last time Canada had a foreign policy agenda worthy of the name.

That said, it is entirely right for the Canadian government to adopt once again an explicit human security *approach* within its foreign policy, by focusing on certain kinds of threats to people and certain communities that are especially vulnerable to those threats. That is how Canadians



started the last time: by letting practice inform theory. A couple of successful diplomatic initiatives will increase the credibility of this approach with the Canadian public and partners, and will energize the bureaucracy far more than pronouncing an overly ambitious agenda from the outset.

Which issues to pick? Making choices need not be complicated. This government would do well by starting with three well-defined issues where it has already carved out a political profile: the protection of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs); promoting pluralism as a means of combatting hate and exclusion; and empowering women as a means of pushing back against institutionalized discrimination and tolerance of violence. All three issues need more international champions. All three require both diplomatic advocacy and international assistance. All three issues require the commitment of civil society and the private sector in order to make progress. And all three also need work in Canada. It should be a no-brainer for any Canadian government to put these three human security issues at or near the top of its foreign policy agenda.

Canada should also renew its commitment to using the tools that were successful in promoting the original human security agenda. First and foremost, this means reallocating some money to invest in ideas. A huge impact was achieved with only a few million dollars a year allocated to pushing the intellectual envelope on some of the hardest and most complex international questions, like humanitarian intervention. Global Affairs should reallocate some of its existing resources to a program that explicitly funds policy research and it should pilot new policy approaches with international partners. The department has managed effectively a number of such programs in the past which would be easy to revive, if Ministers agree. Once done, Canada should not be parochial about where these resources are spent. Investment in thought is only going to have impact if you work with the best in the world.

Finally, if Canada is going to take human security seriously again, then it should spend time thinking about the larger drivers of global change and how those make people more or less secure. One could come up with a long list of global trends. I will identify only four:

- increasing global migration including refugee flows;
- new diseases that rapidly cross international borders;
- an increasingly connected and competitive digital world; and
- global climate change.

What unites these four global trends is that together they erode the political, economic, social and environmental boundaries that underpin people's sense of security that the future will resemble the present. All four of these trends are directly related to human security in terms of threats to people's lives and their livelihoods but none of them are confined to threats of violence – which was the explicit focus of Canada's previous human security agenda.

Rather than get mired in theoretical debates about how far it is useful to stretch the concept of human security, instead let's call these 'global issues' on which a Department of Global Affairs should have something to say. Canada's foreign policy, development policy and defence policy need to take these global issues into account, as all of them will increasingly affect the security of everyone on the planet, including Canadians.

Thus I conclude with a new question: is there an appetite for a new global issues agenda for Canada? There should be.



¹ While the Conservative government discarded the human security agenda, they did not cease work on all of the issues that had been bundled by the Liberals under that rubric. It is worth noting that the initiative launched by Foreign Minister John Baird to combat child, early and forced marriage could be easily described as a human security initiative.

² This Canadian approach to human security was spelled out in a concept paper written by DFAIT with a Foreword by Lloyd Axworthy and released in April 1999 just before the first Ministerial meeting of the Human Security Network in Bergen, Norway. See: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. *Human Security: Safety for People in a Changing World*. Ottawa: DFAIT, 1999. For some of the many other approaches to defining and using the concept, see: Martin, Mary, and Owen, Taylor, eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Human Security*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

³ This agenda was spelled out in the brochure published by DFAIT in mid-2000. A second edition of with the same five themes but a slightly evolved version of the agenda was published by DFAIT in 2002. See: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. *Freedom from Fear: Canada's Foreign Policy Agenda for Human Security*. Ottawa: DFAIT, 2002.

⁴ For many case studies illustrating this see: Hubert, Don, and McRae, Rob, eds. *Human Security and the New Diplomacy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.

► **About the Author**

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