

Handbook on Climate Change and Human Security

Edited by Michael R. Redclift and Marco Grasso

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This edited volume, intended to scholars and decision-makers, aims to provide an overview of the current knowledge and academic debates on human security in relation to climate change. More specifically, the editors set two main objectives: firstly, to draw together a 'solid body of scholarship, much of which remains dispersed and, occasionally, located within specialized academic literatures'; secondly, 'to take the arguments about the relationship between climate change and human security forward,' and thus to 'reflect on both concepts, and the research which underpins them' (Michael Redclift and Marco Grasso, p. 16).

The chapters are written by social scientists from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, geography, anthropology, development studies, and international relations. The first four chapters provide a general theoretical overview of the concepts, in complement with the introduction. The next three chapters discuss the determinants of human security. Five subsequent chapters retrace case studies from Latin America and the Caribbean, the Mediterranean region, the Arctic, and Africa. The final four chapters examine possible responses to the threats posed by climate change to human security. Overall, the volume fulfils its objective of providing an overview of the topic in a well-organized and relatively concise way.

This general overview inevitably reflects the great confusion of existing debates relating to the concept of human security. The editors strive to provide a definition of human security that goes beyond all-encompassing considerations, according to which the concept 'is almost unanimously agreed to concern both needs and rights, to include both individuals and communities, and to prioritize them, to integrate different drivers, and to demonstrate a concern for justice' (Michael Redclift and Marco Grasso, p. 5). As such, the rejection of the alternative concept of sustainable development on the ground that 'almost everybody could sign up to it' (p. 2) is unconvincing: the same obviously applies to human security for lack of a distinctive definition. Building on these shaky conceptual foundations, contributors naturally acknowledge that 'linking human security and climate change is not an easy matter once one gets past the obvious invocation of general dangers due to large-scale environmental disruption' (Dalby, p. 21). Some chapters are confined either to a conceptual discussion of human security without any significant linkage with climate change (e.g. chapters 2 and 5), or to a general discussion of the impacts of climate change where the concept of human security is, overall, absent (e.g. chapters 7 and 14).

Adding to the conceptual confusion, most chapters relate the concept of human security to other concepts instead of providing a proper definition. Thus, some of the authors draw parallels between human security and, for instance, 'human flourishing' (Dalby, p. 30), 'capabilities' and 'livelihood' (Scheffran and Remling, p. 137), 'carbon capability' (Hall, p. 348), 'vulnerability' (Ribot, p. 165), 'adaptation' (Spring et al., pp. 227f) or 'adaptive capacity' (Grasso and Feola, p. 270), 'one's potential as an individual and as part of a wider community' (Simon, p. 113), 'the humanist values expressed by the human rights tradition' (Des Gasper, p. 44), and the defence of 'opportunities for safe, dignified and inclusive human development' (Mason, p. 382). The reader inevitably begins to wonder what the concept of human security could add to this plethora of pre-existing concepts, and whether it actually adds anything to the existing debates on climate change and adaptation, climate change and development, climate change and human rights, or climate justice. While Des Gasper argues that 'the greatest value-added of human security analysis rests in its equity agenda' (at 62), this does not distinguish human security from other concepts, such as human rights and sustainable development, with their well-established moral foundations.

Instead of an analytical concept, human security may seem to be a political motto—a catchy phrase to convey a large set of ideas more or less consistently related, or parts of a distinctive political program. This is perhaps the sense of Mason’s claim that ‘human security framings recast the idea of climate change as a development-oriented rather than environmental challenge’ (p. 382). Analytically, the relevance of social and cultural interpretations of climate change has been famously emphasized by Mike Hulme¹ without using the concept of human security. In terms of political communication, however, human security casts development needs in a new discourse and suggests that ‘a new political order is urgently needed’ (Redclift and Grasso, pp. 7-8). Thus human security is more than anything else a rallying cry for engaged academics eager to defend a pro-poor agenda in responses to climate change (e.g. chapters 2, 5, and 7), to denounce the existing political order (Dalby, p. 38), and to develop a ‘counter-concept that attempts to turn the frequently predominant implicit association of “security” with the security of the state, to a focus instead on the security of human persons, seen as real individuals in the round, and not only as bodies and statistics’ (Des Gasper, p. 41).

A mere rallying cry does not suffice to preach beyond the converted. For instance, the reader is led to wonder how the concept of human security could successfully oppose states’ short-sighted policies with regard to South-North migration (Dalby, p. 34), in relation to which discourses based on human rights or development have vainly pleaded for policy changes. Is it really rhetorically more powerful to say that climate change will ‘make numerous people food insecure’ (Dalby, p. 36), instead of just speaking about additional deaths from starvation? The concept here only blurs the message. As Des Gasper acknowledges, ‘One cannot reasonably merely assert priority via use of security language; one should have convincing reasons for it’ (p. 49).

The use of the term ‘security’ shows that ‘the global governance addressed, even challenged, by [the] construction [of the concept of human security] was the international security system’ (Mason, p. 386). Yet, while the concept of human security has met great success in some academic spheres, it has not persuaded the security community to change its approach and ‘shift [its focus] from states to individuals and communities’ (Redclift and Grasso, p. 5). In fact, the security community is not among the book’s intended audience as defined by the editors (Redclift and Grasso, p. 6). Absent a persuasive argument addressed to the security community, it is little more than wishful thinking to claim that ‘human security analysis can contribute ... to increasing sympathetic attention to the difficulties of others’ and that it ‘may support the changes that are needed for global sustainability in respect of how people perceive shared vulnerabilities, shared interests, and shared humanity’ (Des Gasper, p. 61; see also Redclift and Grasso, p. 8).

This volume therefore is largely about the emperor’s new clothes, which nobody can see yet which nobody wants to deny because of the misguided assumption that a well-intended discourse can do no wrong. Most ethical and policy-relevant reflections within the volume, despite their branding as human security, rehearse standard considerations for human rights protection and sustainable development (e.g. chapters 15 and 16). The concept of human security is at best an unnecessary digression, as for instance when Grasso and Feola argue that the more capable states in the Mediterranean region ought to help those most affected by climate change (pp. 272-275). At worst, this add-on concept can divert much-needed attention from more real questions, which have been discussed in other conceptual frameworks. For instance, the concept of human security does little to help us understand the scope of the duty of assistance, or the ethical relevance of the distance of other individuals in assessing our obligation to help them (chapter 10). Nor does this conceptual framework help elucidate the balance that needs to be struck between the protection of collective and individual interests—the balance between human rights and development (see e.g. Des Gasper, p. 42). The work’s long conceptual digression draws attention away from the relevance of political agency and state sovereignty, from consideration for the necessary limitations of the role of international institutions in promoting domestic development and adaptation policies, and from the risks of a green neo-colonialism (see e.g. Dalby, p. 38, Mason, p. 384). Overall, more is possibly lost than gained

¹ Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

when renouncing to the language of rights and entitlements, to plunge the protection of individuals and communities into a discourse on security.

This volume provides a useful overview of the debate on climate change and human security but, by so doing, also reveals the weakness of this conceptual framework and its limited ability to guide responses to climate change. It is far from clear how the concept of human security could bring forward original reflections on climate change and its governance. For the most part, this volume highlights the need for a continued reflection of the role of human rights and development in responses to climate change at all levels of governance.

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