

Investigating the paradox of Human Security Theory
- A case for arms control in West Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

The start of the twenty-first century was marked by renewed global concern with a concept of human security that has challenged the very core of the traditional security paradigm. The renewed security agenda endeavors to approach security more inclusively in a way that encompasses not only the State, but the region, society and the individual. Within this paradigm, the individual or the society has become the nexus of its concern, and the lens through which policy is formulated and implemented.

This area under discussion has become particularly true for arms control in West Africa. Some analyst and policy makers argue that the impact of arms availability and misuse in the sub-region ultimately undermines the fundamental goals of individual security. The human security theory has therefore been adopted as the decisive approach to all arms control matters.

However, since the inception of the people-centred approach, there has been differing viewpoints on whether the term should refer to a more comprehensive national security approach taking into account their distinctly human dimension or whether it should simply confine itself to describing a more narrow approach of individual security focusing on freedom from fear and want. This is particularly significant for a region where the State in its present form is a relatively new form of political organization with complex sociopolitical system and striving to establish its legitimacy, national unity and sovereignty in a volatile environment. How could the human security approach be measured and adopted without threatening the very existence of the Nation State.

While the validity of the normative interpretation of human security is relatively uncontested, its analytic utility is fiercely debated. The human security concept has been challenged as conceptually weak. Central to this debate is its broad definitional clarity and measurement methodology. The paper seeks to explain the conceptual clarity and analytic utility of the human security approach by using arms proliferation in West Africa (Sierra Leone) as a case study. The paper adopts this particular case study because it

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considers the perception and significance of security as varying in every social and political system in the world. In this case, the concept of human security should be measured simply by limiting the threat to its severity and local significance.

The paper will use the levels of analysis methodology adopted by Buzan, Waever and Wilde to explain the dynamics of security within the system. The study will locate the dominant referent object seen to be existentially threatened and have a legitimate claim to survival; the securitizing actors who declare the dominant referent object as existentially threatened and dynamics of interaction that operate in the realm of security¹. In doing so, it will also consider the State system in the light of the numerous challenges confronting it, taking into account their distinctly human dimension.

Understanding the dynamics of arms control in West Africa

Arms control efforts in West Africa has nothing to do with nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction or to heavy conventional weapons. For West Africa, the gravest security threat lies at the crossroads of the threat posed by the proliferation, availability and indiscriminate use of small arms. Broadly speaking, small includes self-loading pistols, rifles and carbines, sub-machine-guns, assault rifles, light machine-guns, man-portable firearms and their ammunition, light artillery guns and rockets, and guided missiles for use against armored vehicles, aircraft, or fortifications.

The threat posed by these weapons goes beyond its traditional focus on external military threats to territorial and political integrity of States. At least for the region, these weapons have fueled a number of intrastate and local conflicts -- killing, injuring, and displacing millions of people, primarily women and children, from Liberia to Sierra Leone to Ivory Coast. At the same time, the proliferation and misuse of small arms have facilitated State collapse from Liberia to Sierra Leone to Ivory Coast; as well as civil unrest in the cassamance region of Senegal-Gambia, Southern Guinea, Northern Ghana and delta region in Nigeria. The rippling effect of arms proliferation and its associated human cost

1 (1). Referent objects: things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival (2) Securitizing actors: actors who securitize issues by declaring something-a referent object-existentially threatened. (3) Functional actors: actors who affects the dynamics of a sector. Without being the referent object, this is an actor who significantly influences decisions in the field of security. See Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*

on States within the region have made small arms West Africa's real weapons of mass destruction.



Security threat related to arms control in region is associated with a host of measures across a wide variety of institutional sectors and involves a very diverse range of actors. The complexity of this effort lies between reconciling the threat to the wellbeing of human lives with traditional approaches to peace and security. This State-centred approach has been criticized for neglecting the people, i.e. individual security. In this case, whether to limit 'security' to the State level, or extend the term to the individual and/or societal level is a matter of arbitrary definition. Neither is an end in itself, even though 'societal security' will suffice in this situation.

The approach to arms control in the region focuses on the interaction between the supply and demand sides to the issue. The challenge to this interconnectedness is the role the competing referent objects – the State and the society or individual - play independently or collectively in arms control.

The supply side of arms control focuses on illicit trade by making cross-border arms transfers including export, imports, and transparency regimes, subject to State, regional and international regulation. The demand-side factor is not focused intentionally on weapons control, but is conducted to end wars, control violence, increase development or empower marginalized populations The demand factor therefore refers to a number of issues including conflict resolution, community development, justice reform, youth programming, postwar peace building and attitude change that is far beyond the

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experience of national bureaucracies of defense and foreign affairs that normally deal with arms control.

Referent of Security – State or individual-collectivity?

Policy makers and civil society working on arms control in the region have endorsed the human security paradigm as the ultimate approach to addressing the issue. The shift from the normative approach to arms control to a more people-centered approach has arisen out of the realization that the impact of the availability and misuse of small arms undermines the vital core of human rights and human fulfillment. The question is whether this new security agenda has considerably been generalized and made monolithic neglecting the key role of the sovereign State. Theoretically, how can human security be measured and how does it relate to traditional approaches to arms control?

The State dimension of security has several different aspects, some of which concern the relationship between the State and 'its' citizens, while others have to do regional and international relations. "Internally, it defines and protects the life, liberty, and property of individuals and groups through the creation of political and socio-economic order. Externally, it protects the rights of its citizens from harmful actions of other States and non-State entities"². So far as small arms control in West Africa is concerned, the State as the dominant referent object existentially threatened has been challenged on at least 4 counts

First, though the State remains the primary political community and actor and the primary agent and provider of security, in this context, it is not the dominant referent object as professed by realist debates. In the West African case the referent object has shifted to the sub-State level. According to Human Rights Watch, over 50,000 people were killed in the Sierra Leonean conflict, with over one million people being displaced. The very nature of the conflict - intra-state - made the civilian population deliberate targets in these conflicts. A significant proportion of the civilian population were exploited and controlled in order to sustain the conflict. The conflict in Sierra Leone was characterized by the systematic and widespread perpetration of all classes of gross human rights abuses against the civilian population. Civilians were gunned down within their houses,

² Muthiah Alagappa (ed), *Asian Security Practice*, Standard University Press, Standard, California, 1998, p. 29

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rounded up and massacred on the streets, and used as human shields. At gun point women and girls were systematically sexually abused, and children and young people abducted by the hundreds³.

Second, the State became a source of threat to its own citizens it was supposed to protect. Arms proliferation to Sierra Leone risked the lives of the very people the State was supposed to protect. UN reports show how weapons are illicitly exported, transported with the connivance of government officials in many countries and smuggled into war zones. Recognizing the critical role that small arms play in exacerbating conflicts, the international community and the Security Council, tried to control the flow of weapons into the country, by placing Sierra Leone under a variety of travel, economic and military sanctions⁴. In October 1998, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) “considering the fact that the proliferation of light weapons constitutes a destabilizing factor for ECOWAS Member States and a threat to the peace and security of our people⁵” ECOWAS approved a three-year moratorium on the production, procurement, and sale of small arms and light weapons for the sub-region. Nevertheless, rebels and the government continues to obtain weapons illegally via countries such as Liberia and Burkina Faso, while the government of Sierra Leone received substantial weaponry from the United Kingdom⁶. As a result of this irresponsible act by States, the Peace Agreement signed in 1999 (Lomé Peace Agreement) failed after a year and the conflict resumed with catastrophic humanitarian crises.

Third, one of the critical foundations on the realist conception of the State as wielding power and achieve security based on self-help in armament was challenged by the Sierra Leone case study. For the realist, self-help does not rule out seeking assistance from others. Alliances and alignments are viewed as ways of enhancing national power and spreading cost. An alliance is formed in response to imbalance of power⁷. This

3 http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/sierra/SIERLE99-03.htm#P182_39824

4 See UN Document S/RES/1132 (1997), 8 October 1997.

5 Declaration of a Moratorium on Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Light Weapons in West Africa Economic Community of West African States, Twenty-first ordinary session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government, Abuja, 30-31 October, 1998

6 UN Document S/2000/455, “Fourth Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone,” 19 May 2000, para. 59.

7 Muthiah Alagappa (ed), *Asian Security Practice*, Standard University Press, Standard, California, 1998, p. 52, quoted from (Waltz 1979: 123-31)

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premise was not applicable to Sierra Leone because there was virtually no government in place to rally the State for self-help. The regime in power had no legitimacy over its population beyond the capital city Freetown; and State autonomy and sovereignty have been compromised in fundamental areas such as security, capital regulation, migration, etc. In this case, assistance to Sierra Leone was not based on alliances or alignments but an act of humanitarian intervention of the international community to respond to the horrific humanitarian crises within the country.

Fourth, humanitarian intervention by independent trans-national actors, supra national and sub-national identities challenged the State autonomy and sovereignty. International civil society and trans-national actors responded to the demand factors of small arms control including community development, youth programming and peace building. The regional body –ECOWAS, made a conscious decision to respond to the humanitarian crises by sending in a peace keeping force to restore order in the society.

While the State autonomy was compromised, the national boundaries hardly disintegrated despite the social disintegration. Sierra Leone and its boundaries were still intact and State boundaries were recognised by ECOWAS member States, the African Union and United Nations. Nevertheless, what is seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival was the individual and societal well being. The above factors have challenged the State as the dominant referent existentially threatened so far as arms control is concerned in West Africa.

Defining and Measuring Human Security Threat

With the objectives of the security infrastructure widening well beyond the preservation of State integrity, the question is, what is and is not a security threat and what could be included as relevant threats?

Focusing on the protection of the individual goes as far back to the security debate of the Eighteenth century liberalist view. Though liberal perspectives were in agreement over the vital role of individual safety they were not unanimous. Some believed that this could best be achieved as a consequence of the security of the State — the State, thus, acting

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as protector from both external and internal threats while others focused on freedom and the perceived rights of individuals over the dictated security provided by the State. This included some rough reflections to parts of the works of Montesquieu, Rousseau and Condorcet, Kant, Hobbes and Smith⁸

Two conceptual schools of thought have emerged in which most definitions can be grouped. These are the broad and narrow conceptions of human security. The broad definition incorporates a long list of possible threats, from traditional security threats such as war to more development-oriented threats such as health, poverty and the environment. While the narrow definition is limited to violent threats such as landmines, small arms, violence and intra-state conflict.

There is little chance that a globally satisfying definition will be found in the near future. An attempt to define the concept would leave out too many critical threats and ignore the value of 'local specific' threats and projected future good. It needs to be noted that the perception and significance of security varies in every social and political system in the world.

In response to critics' view that the current definition of human security lacks conceptual clarity, an overarching concept or definition should be adopted - "Human Security is the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats"⁹ - and measured simply by limiting the threat to the severity and local significance rather than a preconceived list of available global threats¹⁰.

The advantage of this definition is that it both focuses on the individual while also indicating a universalism in its mandate. The terms 'vital core' and 'critical and pervasive threats' embeds a necessary degree of severity within the concept. These sets out the parameter wide enough to incorporate all threats but narrow enough to recognize local significance and consider only those that are critical and pervasive threats to human security.

⁸ See Owen Taylor, 2004. 'Challenges and opportunities for defining and measuring human security', Disarmament Forum [Human Rights, Human Security and Disarmament], page 16

⁹ The first part of the definition is derived from the Commission on Human Security:

¹⁰ See Owen Taylor, 2004. 'Challenges and opportunities for defining and measuring human security', Disarmament Forum [Human Rights, Human Security and Disarmament] 3: 15-24.

The problem here is how this measurement of human security can stay true to the broad and narrow nature of human security by not leaving out any serious threat harming individuals, while at the same time limiting or refining the threats to a manageable and measurable list. Limiting the relevance of the threat to local relevance as the criteria for threat selection means that no serious harm will be excluded, and also improves the chances of acquiring relevant data for measurement.

“Once data depicting the regionally relevant human security threats are collected, they can then be spatially analyzed. This can be done in a Geographic Information System (GIS). Layering human security data in a GIS, whether they be hydrologic flood data, economic poverty data or epidemiological disease data, allows for innovative aggregation of information and powerful spatial analysis. Further, spatial analysis can find ‘hotspots’ of aggregated human insecurity (regions suffering from multiple security threats) and can help us understand the spatial relationships between these threats. For example, using spatial statistics and building statistical models, one can determine correlations between the human security threats measured and a wide array of socio-economic variables”¹¹

The dynamics of interaction that operate in the realm of security

There is more than one referent object in the security realm – the individual, society, State and region. It becomes crucial to distinguish between individual, society and State in order to identify the tension among them and design appropriate response to the core security issue.

Levels of analysis put forward by Buzan, Waever and Wilde is central to locating the dominant referent object and securitizing agent¹². The Chart below demonstrates the interaction between 5 most frequently used levels of analysis:

- (1) the international system
- (2) the international subsystems - (regional bodies or cross-regional bodies and multilateral organizations made up of States

¹¹ McRae, Rob. “Human security in a Globalized World” in McRae, Rob and Hubert, Don, eds. *Human Security and the New Diplomacy: Protecting People, Promoting Peace*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), Page 22

¹² Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*

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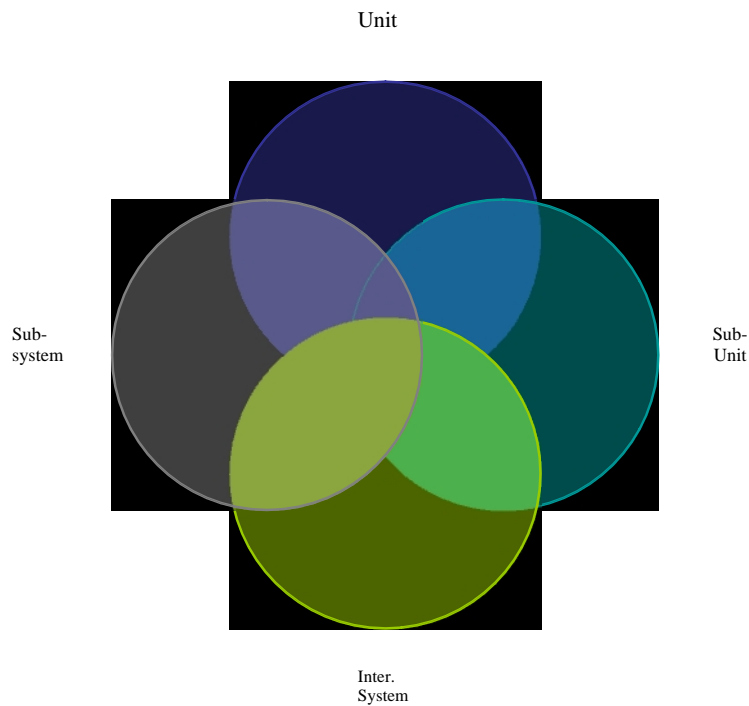
- (3) the Units – (States, nations, trans-national firms)
- (4) the sub-unit – (bureaucracies, lobbies, interest groups etc – that affect the behaviour of the unit)
- (5) the individual

The levels of analysis debate in international relations have been closely associated with neorealism, thus reinforcing the State centric thinking. However the level of analysis scheme in its neorealist form is problematic since the analysis limits itself to State which is only makes up part of the Unit level, international subsystem and international system. Such an explanation discriminates against other parts of the Units made up of trans-national firms, the sub-unit and the individual.

The human security debate puts the individual as its source of explanation of the level of analysis. This source of explanation is part of every level – from the individual, to the sub-unit, Units, international subsystems and international system. This source of explanation does not discriminate against any level.

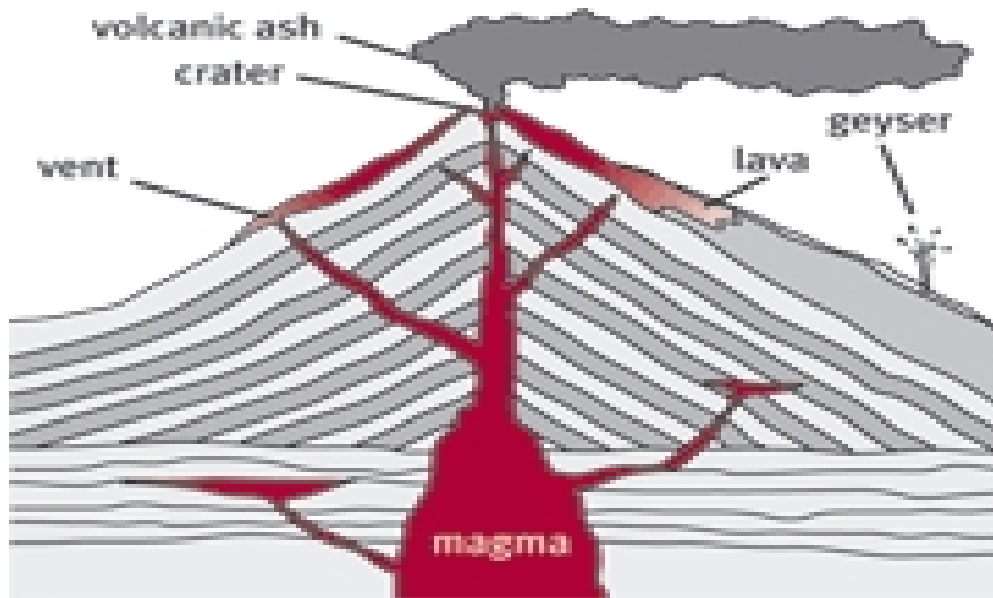
The chart below demonstrates that at the core of the systems and Unit levels is the individual. Since all the interactions meet at a core of the individual, the individual has become the source of explanation. With regard to arms control in West Africa, the individual per se does not necessary become the dominant referent. Here, the dominant referent becomes the individual-collectivity, community or society. This supports Buzan's argument that security is primarily about the fate of human collectivities, the pursuit of freedom from threat and bottom line is about survival¹³.

13 Barry Buzan, 1991



Actions by the Sub-Unit, Unit, international sub-systems and international systems, society and individual securitize issues by declaring the individual or community as the dominant referent object existentially threatened. It need be noted that security threat to the individual per se is not severe enough to impact on the security of the other levels and qualify as the dominant referent object. Rather it takes a threat to groups of individuals or the community for it to ripple through the cracks of other levels in order to qualify as a security threat existentially threatened. This could be likened to a volcano activity where the magma (society), takes the form of lava to penetrate through the vent through other levels to the surface as volcanic ash to affect its surrounding environment (region).

The threat of arms proliferation and misuse to the society has manifested itself by the severity of the threat to the society and its impact on the other societies, the State and the region. Additionally, what legitimizes the society as the dominant referent object is the recognition of securitizing actors and functional actors who have securitize issues by declaring the society as the referent object-existentially threatened and significantly influences decisions in the field of security through their response to arms control in the region.



The International community, United Nations, ECOWAS, States, International organisations, NGOs and civil society groups took relevant measures to intervene and address the humanitarian crises in Sierra Leone when they realised that the proliferation of arms had broken down communities and the threat tended to be major risk to the survival of the State and regional security.

The logic of security involves high levels of interdependence among the actors trying to make themselves secure. The West African case study on arms control demonstrates that all levels of actors could be the source and response to the threat of human insecurity – however the individual-collectivity is the dominant referent object and the State is the dominant actor – central decision making organization- that accommodates and cooperates with all other sectors. All the sectors will have distinctive patterns and roles, but will remained inseparable parts of complex wholes.

Reconciling Human Security and Traditional Security

The State is the dominant form of political organization. Internally, it defines and protects the life, liberty, and property of individuals and groups through the creation of political

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and socio-economic order. Externally, it protects the rights of its citizens from the harmful actions of other States and non-State entities.¹⁴

By virtue of the social contract between the State and its citizens, the individual still remains the nexus of concern to national security. These concerns have at least been traditionally the domain of democratic States, where concerns of the citizens have been considered, if not always successful.

Key issues have fallen through the cracks as traditional security failed at its primary objective to protect the individual. "National security is the inseparable unity of external and internal security of the State or nation¹⁵" This is particularly true for the African State that is a relatively new form of political organization in its present form. The State suffers limitations as a provider of security and in some cases; its legitimacy may be contested by strong competing identities such as ethnicity, language, religion - which have created solidarities that do not coincide with the nation State boundaries. Security defined by the government may differ from security of the society or groups within it. Therefore the State should not be uncritically accepted as the sole referent of security¹⁶.

According to Rob McRae "security is a single continuum, and is protected and enhanced by a series of interlocking instruments and policies....[t]he old instruments are neither discarded nor superseded-they become integral to a new, more comprehensive approach centred on the protective welfare of civilians¹⁷"

The challenge is to adapt responses that are more responsive and flexible to emerging threats both to the State and individual. How can the State increase its sense of foreign policy principle and maintain principles of national sovereignty while engaging and connecting with its own citizens.

14 Muthiah Alagappa (ed), *Asian Security Practice*, Standard University Press, Standard, California, 1998, p. 29

15 F. Rubin, *The Theory and Concept of National Security in Warsaw Pact Countries*, *International Affairs*, (Royal Institute for International Affairs 1944) Vol. 58, No. 4, (Autumn, 1982), Vol. 648-657

16 Muthiah Alagappa (ed), *Asian Security Practice*, Standard University Press, Standard, California, 1998, p. 23,

17 McRae, Rob. "Human security in a Globalized World" in McRae, Rob and Hubert, Don, eds. *Human Security and the New Diplomacy: Protecting People, Promoting Peace*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001)

Conclusion

This State-centred approach has been criticized for neglecting the people, i.e. individual security. In this case, whether to limit 'security' to the State level, or extend the term to the individual and/or societal level is a matter of arbitrary definition. Neither is an end in itself, even though 'societal security' suffices in the context of small arms control in West Africa.

The human security theory posits the individual as the dominant referent object at the centre of security policy. Proliferation and misuse of small arms has reaffirmed collective individuals or society as the nexus of its concern, and the lens through which policy is formulated and implemented.

Human Security is the protection of the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats” – Human security should be measured simply by limiting the threat to the severity and local significance rather than a preconceived list of available global threats.

All levels of analysis could be the source and response to the threat of human insecurity – however the State is the dominant actor – central decision making organization- that accommodates and cooperates with all other sectors. The logic of security involves high levels of interdependence among the actors trying to make themselves secure. All the sectors have distinctive patterns and roles, but will remain inseparable parts of complex wholes. When it comes to arms control in West Africa the individual (Society) remains the dominant referent object existentially threatened. In this case practice has preceded theory. Human security has forced States to look more inward to the people from where it draws its legitimacy.