
doi:10.1017/S0165070X1200006X

Africa has a wide range of legislative and policy instruments that define the rights of citizens and that prescribe the obligation of states. In spite of this, it is a matter of common knowledge that little has been achieved at the grass-roots level. For decades, many research and policy initiatives have been undertaken, resulting mainly in scholarly discourses, sometimes to be quickly forgotten, because they are quite often distant from the experience of the continent’s peoples and there is little chance that these theories will be applied in practice. Also – however pertinent such literature and initiatives may sometimes be – they often cannot be effectuated owing to the lack of ‘impetus’ from the continent’s ‘leaders’. Just to pick up on the latter point, it is only in a handful of African countries that an election can take place without rigging and a loss of lives. Moreover, the continent is home to chronic diseases and abject poverty. The rule of law and democratic governance are given only nominal attention: Africa stands as an example of cases where legislation is used to safeguard the political interests of the ruling classes and citizens’ demands for fundamental rights and basic services are routinely perceived by the authorities as threats to state security and that such demands are often quick to be repressed.

Abass’ *Protecting Human Security in Africa* (PHSA), however, introduces a broader concept of security and a new approach to understanding and addressing the threats to human security in Africa. In addition to its substantive merits (see below), PHSA, in terms of methodology, presents detailed legislative-policy analyses in the light of the proposed human security framework. In this respect, two key features establish the strength of the book: first, the concept of human security laid down in the first chapter consistently runs throughout the book; secondly, each contribution offers, from the human security perspective, a critical and balanced analysis of the effectiveness of the normative and policy instruments and the (regional) institutional frameworks currently in place.

The book begins with the editor’s succinct introduction to the concept of human security and the theme of each of the contributions (pp. 1 et seq.). It is stated that human security became thrust upon the international plane through UNDP’s Human Development Report of 1994, in which a people-centred approach was proposed, as opposed to the traditional state-centric notion of security. Given that, for a long period of time, the term security has been construed to mean mainly political and territorial security; this departure from the traditional understanding of security is indeed remarkable. The concept of human security (as formulated by UNDP), has two broad aspects – safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression, and protection from sudden and hurtful disruption to the pattern of daily life – and four distinct characteristics: human security is universal; its components are interdependent; the prevention of threats to human security is relatively
easier and more economical than humanitarian actions; and, finally, it is people-centred (pp. 1-3).

The editor also discusses the similarities and differences between human security, human development and human rights (pp. 4-7) so as to establish human security as a new global phenomenon worthy of distinct academic research. It is true that these three pursue essentially a common goal and therefore are mutually reinforcing.

‘Despite the synergy between human security, human rights, and human development, human security has a unique and distinctive streak which makes its particularized treatment highly desirable. The scope of human security is enormous and the ramifications of what threatens it are so pervasive that, as a paradigm, it encompasses the whole of the human existence. A breakdown or malfunctioning of human security has disastrous consequences for human development and human rights: if individual security is not guaranteed or protected, the cohesive order of the aggregative society is either unrealizable or invariably destroyed, and the promotion and protection of human rights is permanently ousted or perpetually held in abeyance’ (p. 7).

Regarding the question as to whether ‘such values’ of human security can be said to ‘justify an entirely new different approach for addressing human security concerns’, Abass outlines ‘four compelling arguments’. First, the human security approach can help to achieve a more transparent and effective scrutiny as regards derogations from human rights, particularly due to a state of emergency declaration. It is in the structure of the human rights regime that states have a margin of discretion in assessing the nature, source and magnitude of a state of emergency. This subjective and ‘unlimited’ power of the state, in turn, has been the source of human rights abuses. By putting emphasis on the human (peoples’) safety, as opposed to that of the few elites in the government, the human security approach can promote transparency and the effective scrutiny of the state of emergency declaration and its operation (p. 8).

Secondly, human security, unlike a human rights approach, calls for a more robust regional protection system (p. 9; according to Abass, this idea is also supported by the monist doctrine of international law). The structure of the human rights regime requires those who seek an international remedy to first exhaust nationally available procedures. In the situation where states themselves are gross violators of human rights, expecting them to guarantee any form of rights or to provide for an effective remedy mechanism may be wishful thinking, or ‘shadow chasing’, as he rightly puts it. However, a more objective protection of human security can better be ensured through regional mechanisms. This is particularly the case given the higher level of sensitivity involved in issues of human security and the scope of the repercussions that may ensue from violations of human security (see pp. 7 and 9).

Moreover, human security may limit the discretion inherent in the progressive realization of socio-economic rights. Further, the human security approach rejects the categorization of various human rights into ‘generations’. As it can be seen, the ideals contained in the third and fourth aspect of the human security approach clearly reinforces the basic idea of the indivisibility of the human rights and freedoms (pp. 7 and 9).