

What is the “Human” in Human Security?

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Human security is a form of security that prioritizes the individual rather than the state as its basic unit. The concept of human security is distinctive in that, in advocating security, it turns its attention to the individual rather than the state. Public initiatives in education and health have historically focused on individuals, even before the concept of human security was developed. However, the fact that the concept of “human security” has been advocated by an organization like JICA is highly significant, given that, as an international aid organization, JICA has mainly engaged with governments rather than individuals. Yet, the organization regards human security as a response to threats—on par with threats to national security.

Here, let us pause to consider for a moment: what does the “human” in “human security” actually refer to? Most discussions on this topic have focused on the second part of the term, looking at what “security” means. The first part of the term—the “human” in human security—has been surprisingly overlooked, and its meaning is frequently taken for granted. Indeed, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, use the slogan “Leaving no one behind.” It now appears entirely mainstream to think of the individual human being in isolation as the ultimate target of development cooperation.

Yet, no human being lives entirely alone. The nature of the aid to be directed toward an individual varies depending on the groups they are considered to belong to. Amartya Sen argues that individuals simultaneously belong to and form their identities within multiple groups—the family, local community, school, workplace, people, country, and so forth (Sen 2017). Because the groups that an individual belongs to may not be readily visible and overlap multiple domains, the interrelations among these multiple domains are

particularly difficult for the outside observer to parse. If we restrict our field of vision to the readily visible and the “right here, right now,” we are liable to misinterpret the essence of the issue at hand and the steps necessary to address it. For example, when we provide support to refugees, it is not enough to simply manage the situation in a refugee camp. We also need to consider refugees’ connections with family and friends remaining in their area of origin.

Thus, an individual may belong to a family, a village, a local residents’ association, or any other such collective. Given these collectives’ deep roots in the community, individuals often turn to them first in urgent cases of need. These groups form the individual’s immediate loci of belonging. Thought about in this way, human security is not something aimed at the individual in isolation, but rather the individual as a member of all kinds of groups. The group might be a religious body such as a church or mosque, a network of people organized along ethnic lines, or those sharing a locality. It could be a work-based group, such as a farmers’ or fishers’ association, or a collective built on socioeconomic grounds, such as a labor union.

The concept of the individual as an autonomous subject in the history of Western thought can be traced back to Immanuel Kant. This concept was further enhanced through the French Revolution and the American Declaration of Independence, with the “individual” emerging as the embodiment of humanism and taking on the meaning of “an independent person” existing apart from the authority of the state. In Japan, however, the term for “individual,” *kojin*, has traditionally been used in ways that position the individual as one member of a group, as in *kaku-kojin* (each individual [in the group]) and *ichi-kojin* (one individual [among others]) (Ishigami 2012).

Perhaps the most remarkable example was the adoption

of Samuel Smiles's *Self-Help* as a school textbook. This work contrasts the "individual" against the "national" and explains that the independence of the former is of importance to the latter. *Self-Help* was translated into Japanese in the early Meiji period (1868–1912) as "Saigoku Risshi-Hen" (Tales of Success from Western Lands). It was used as a textbook in elementary schools that had been recently set up as educational institutions for a new age. The work also became a national bestseller, ranking alongside Yukichi Fukuzawa's "Gakumon no Susume" (An Encouragement of Learning). *Self-Help* received strong support from the educational leaders of the time. Its message of enlightened self-development was viewed as right for a Westernizing Japan to be built on the basis of the autonomous individual. The following passage summarizes Smiles's main ideas (Smiles 1872, 2):

The government of a nation itself is usually found to be the reflex of the individuals composing it. The government that is ahead of the people will inevitably be dragged down to their level, as the government that is behind them will in the long run be dragged up. [...] The noble people will be nobly ruled, and the ignorant and corrupt ignobly. Indeed, all experience serves to prove that the worth and strength of a State depend far less upon the form of its institutions than upon the character of its men.

A Japanese translator working today would undoubtedly translate "individuals" above as *kojin* without hesitation. However, Masanao Nakamura, the Meiji-period figure who made the first Japanese translation of *Self-Help*, chose the word *jinmin*, which carries the sense of "people" in the plural. While Smiles wrote about "individuals" in the sense of "individual human beings"—a concept that would be conveyed today as *kojin*—Nakamura's choice for a term to replace "individuals" in the Japanese context, *jinmin*, has a much more collectivist nuance than Smiles's concept. The original emphasis on individuals' rights was rendered vague by the change of term to *jinmin*, which refers to an unspecified number of people. Thus, Smiles's point was somewhat obscured. Meiji-period Japan had no appropriate term to translate the English-language "individual" in the singular (Maruyama and Kato 1998).

Despite this, Smiles's novel doctrine of self-help was eagerly received in Japan immediately after the Meiji Restoration. One of the factors propelling *Self-Help* to bestseller status in Japan was a backlash against the country's longstanding collectivism. This collectivism was rooted in the communities of family, village, and lordly domain, manifesting as feudalism, patriarchy, and conformism. The unavoidable reality in Japan's rural society, however, was that people had to keep relying on each other. This was a society based on the principle of mutual help.

As the country entered the mid-Meiji period, Japanese nationalism centered around the figure of the Emperor gained remarkable momentum, and Smiles's ideas became increasingly marginalized. The Ministry of Education pivoted back toward the Confucian precepts of "humanity, justice, loyalty, and filial piety." *Self-Help* was pulled from the classroom after a mere ten years as a textbook. More time was needed before the concept of *kojin*, as the single individual, could take root in Japan and be recognized by its government.

Indeed, even today, it cannot be said that the concept of *kojin* in the singular is fully embedded. The attitude expressed in a slogan "human development, nation building, and people-to-people exchange," or *Hito-zukuri, kuni-zukuri, kokoro no fureai*, will be familiar to any longstanding member of JICA. Even today, there seems to be no consensus on whether the human, or *hito*, in the slogan refers to a single individual or an individual as part of a group of some kind. At first glance, the breakdown of the family system and the weakening of community groups such as neighborhood and residents' associations seem to herald the advent of the "age of the individual" in earnest. The spread of the internet has certainly expanded individual freedom and facilitated the formation of online communities. However, we cannot overlook the fact that the decline of community groups that support individuals has led to social issues such as elderly people dying solitary deaths and rising numbers of social recluses (*hikikomori*).

Japan is finding itself reacquainted with the forgotten truth that the individual needs the support of those around them to achieve independence as an individual. The reality that each individual is distinct and unique attests to the importance of recognizing the individual as they appear in

the singular form. Widening social disparities and inequalities should alert us to the structural issues underlying the rise in the number of socially isolated people. Moreover, it highlights those who have no acquaintances or organizations around them to whom to turn when in need. As a practice of care that transcends national borders, development cooperation involves going beyond the transactional “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours” kind of relations prevalent in today’s capitalist society. This is because it does not necessarily expect an equivalent return.

While modern society is often perceived as composed of autonomous individuals bound solely by contractual ties, that is not fundamentally the case. Care of the elderly and child-raising are the obvious examples, and we find around us a growing number of asymmetrical relationships where people must depend on others to survive. It is unrealistic to provide aid to people whose survival is currently threatened in the expectation of some kind of return. Therefore, it is necessary to consider intermediating groups as support systems for vulnerable people precisely because such groups are a familiar presence to such people.

Therefore, human security needs to look beyond the individual in isolation and turn its attention to the groups to which the target individuals belong and need for their survival. Let us consider the fact that such groups may act as buffers against a wide range of shocks that pose threats to survival. In other words, it is up to us to closely examine the nature of the intermediating groups that involve

themselves in people’s everyday lives, devise forms of support that restrain coercive groups, and nudge people toward more dispersed dependence on more open groups. In the long term, there is a need to enhance people’s ability to choose between intermediating groups. Moreover, it is essential to maintain and expand community-rooted mechanisms to rescue vulnerable people (Sato 2023).

The first task is to redefine the basic premise of “the individual” and discover ways in which the individual, in the singular form, can depend on multiple groups other than the state for their survival. This task is all the more urgent in countries and regions that find themselves exposed to the often-overlooked danger that the state itself constitutes a threat to survival.

References

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