

Operationalization of Human Security in Development Cooperation: Enhancing Resilience in the Era of Compound Crises

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Introduction

Sadako Ogata, former President of JICA, once stated that “human security is not a matter of abstract ideals; it is an extremely practical concept that emerged from concrete needs on the ground” (Ogata 2020, 240).

In the more than thirty years since the concept of human security was introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it has been continually scrutinized for its effectiveness in addressing practical problems, precisely because the concept originated from challenges on the ground in real-world settings. In 2003, the Government of Japan revised its Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charter and positioned the perspective of the human security concept as one of its basic policies (MOFA 2003). In the same year, Sadako Ogata assumed the presidency of JICA. As the Government of Japan’s implementing agency for development cooperation, JICA has endeavored for more than twenty years to operationalize human security.

This essay reviews JICA’s efforts over the past two decades, examining the added value the concept of human security has brought to development cooperation agencies and how this added value has become increasingly essential in today’s era of compound crises.

1. The History of JICA’s Operationalization of Human Security

Since 2003, JICA has sought to incorporate the perspective of human security into both the formulation of development cooperation strategies and the implementation of projects in the field. Japan’s current Development Cooperation Charter, revised in 2023, states that “Japan will continue to position human security as a guiding principle that underlies all of its development cooperation” (MOFA 2023).

The added value of human security for JICA has evolved over time, with shifts in the perspectives emphasized. In the following sections, this essay traces the transformation and development of JICA’s operationalization of human security in line with broader trends in international development cooperation.

1.1. Practice during the Ogata Presidency: The Era of Peacebuilding and the MDGs

In the early 2000s, when human security gained prominence and JICA began its practical application of the concept, convergence between development and peace, as well as between development, diplomacy, and security, grew in importance as the need to respond to violent conflicts and peacebuilding efforts expanded after the end of the Cold War

The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official positions of either JICA or the JICA Ogata Research Institute.

(e.g., Paris 2004; Paris and Sisk 2009; OECD 2001).¹ It was also the era in which the Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000, establishing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which focused on poverty reduction and social development.

JICA's early initiatives on human security were characterized by the following aspects within the global trend in development cooperation toward strengthening peacebuilding and poverty reduction: (1) placing the individual at the center of development cooperation; (2) incorporating peacebuilding perspectives into development assistance with the aim of addressing both freedom from want and freedom from fear; and (3) combining protection and empowerment by strengthening empowerment-oriented approaches such as community-driven development, rather than limiting capacity development to government-centered human resource development.

Following Ms. Ogata's appointment as President in October 2003, the JICA Reform Plan, formulated in March 2004, identified three pillars of reform: (1) field-oriented approaches, (2) human security, and (3) effectiveness, efficiency, and rapid implementation (JICA 2004). JICA established internal study groups to examine practical methods to operationalize human security, drawing on insights from the report of the Commission on Human Security (CHS 2003) and organizing them into the so-called "Seven Perspectives of Human Security" (IFIC 2006a).² The first of these seven

perspectives, "Reaching those in need through a human-centered approach," strongly calls for a shift away from the conventional state-centered perspective. Building on this principle, JICA sought to combine protection and empowerment, to bridge the gap between development assistance and humanitarian assistance, and to strengthen multisectoral approaches. Through organization-wide efforts to strengthen these perspectives across projects, JICA expanded its engagement beyond cooperation with central governments to include an increased focus on individuals and closer collaboration with communities. This led to the implementation of numerous community-driven development projects. In the area of peacebuilding, particular emphasis was placed on "seamless assistance" from humanitarian assistance to development and reconstruction. During the 2000s, JICA advanced cooperation in countries and regions such as Timor-Leste, the former Yugoslav countries, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rwanda, Sudan (including South Sudan, which later gained independence), Liberia, and Sierra Leone (JICA 2019a, 34–36).

1.2. Human Security ver.2.0: The 2010s and the SDGs Era

In the 2010s, the range of risks and threats that international cooperation needed to address expanded significantly. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015 as the successor to the MDGs, added issues that had not been explicitly included in the MDGs, such as inequality, climate change, natural disasters, and peace. International recognition of the importance of downside risks was heightened. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, adopted in March 2015, emphasized the importance of investment in disaster risk reduction and improving resilience (UNDRR 2015). In peacebuilding, attention expanded beyond post-conflict reconstruction to include preventive measures addressing factors that heighten the risk of conflict, such as poverty, governance challenges, infectious diseases, and environmental degradation. SDG16, "Peace, justice, and strong institutions," recognized the need to build a just society and protect human dignity in order to sustain peace. Correspondingly, the World Bank broadened its focus from reconstruction to preventing fragility, conflict, and violence

¹ In the 2000s, as the distance between politics/security and development narrowed—reflected in frameworks such as the "3Ds" (defense, diplomacy, and development)—human security was often discussed internationally in connection with an interventionist perspective within foreign and defense policy. However, with the adoption of a United Nations General Assembly resolution in 2012 that explicitly clarified human security as a concept distinct from the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), it became clear that human security is a concept that draws a clear line between itself and politically-driven interventions in domestic affairs.

² The Seven Perspectives of Human Security are: (1) Reaching those in need through a human-centered approach; (2) Empowering people as well as protecting them; (3) Focusing on the most vulnerable people, whose survival, livelihoods, and dignity are at risk; (4) Comprehensively addressing both "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear"; (5) Responding to people's needs by assessing and addressing threats through flexible and intersectoral approaches; (6) Working with both governments and local communities to realize sustainable development; and (7) Strengthening partnership with various actors to achieve a higher impact from assistance (IFIC 2006a, xvi).

(FCV) (World Bank 2011; World Bank 2020), and collaboration between the United Nations and the World Bank on peacebuilding deepened (United Nations and World Bank 2018).

JICA's awareness of resilience as a key element for realizing human security also grew stronger. Prior to the adoption of the SDGs, the JICA Research Institute (now the JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development) published a report on the post-2015 development agenda, *Perspectives on the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, emphasizing inclusiveness and resilience, and highlighting the effectiveness of human security as a guiding principle for addressing complex social challenges (JICA Research Institute 2014).

In response to these changes in the international community, JICA reorganized its thinking on operationalizing human security and revitalized it for a new era. In 2019, JICA compiled the policy document “Revisiting Human Security in Today’s Global Context: JICA’s Activities,”³ often referred to as “Human Security ver.2.0.” While reaffirming that the core concept of human security itself remains unchanged, the document updated approaches to address increasingly diverse risks and threats, placing greater emphasis on building resilient social systems. It also re-emphasized the importance of dignity, which can be difficult to address directly through development cooperation projects, highlighting initiatives such as enhancing peace, reconciliation, and/or social cohesion through sports and social and emotional education that foster autonomy, cooperation, and social skills (JICA 2019b).

Strengthening resilience in development means not only recovering from damage, but also encompasses prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. In the context of peacebuilding, JICA's cooperation has evolved beyond providing seamless post-conflict assistance to enhancing the capacity of states and societies to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of conflicts through a combination of strengthening institutions trusted by citizens and empowering local communities

³ This policy document highlighted the following three principal strategies.

1. Protecting individuals' rights to life, livelihood, and human dignity.
2. Empowering individuals, organizations, and societies to increase their capabilities.
3. Building resilient societies (systems) that can protect themselves against various threats.

(Murotani and Mine 2015; JICA n.d. a).⁴

1.3. Human Security in an Era of Compound Crises: Interactions of Physical, Living, and Social Systems

Today, the world is confronting compound crises, in which multiple interlinked crises unfold simultaneously, making responses to such crises indispensable to the realization of human security (Mine 2024). These crises encompass diverse threats such as conflicts, climate change, infectious diseases, and cyber insecurity, and they interact and cascade at both global and local levels. At the same time, frameworks for international cooperation themselves are becoming increasingly unstable.

In compound crises, various threats—from violence and conflicts arising from human behavior to disasters originating in natural systems—interact with each other. Human activities can also generate new natural threats, for instance, by exacerbating climate change. Tanaka (2015) conceptualized these dynamics as threats to human security in terms of crises involving interactions among physical, living, and social systems. These require interdisciplinary analysis and comprehensive strategies that transcend the boundaries between social and natural sciences.

Because many threats to human security in compound crises spread across multiple layers—from local to national, regional, and global levels—responses limited to communities or individual countries are often insufficient. Reflecting on this, to expand the focus of human security from narrow local activities at the community level to threats interlinked from global to local, the UNDP Special Report of 2022 introduced global “solidarity” as an additional perspective to complement protection and empowerment in responding to transboundary human security threats (UNDP 2022a, 6-7).

For JICA as well, addressing compound crises requires reinforcing not only project-level, locally focused human security approaches, but also broader strategies at the regional and country levels as well as by thematic sectors to link local realities with global dynamics. Responding effectively to diverse risks inherent in compound crises necessitates

⁴ See also JICA's Global Agenda for Peacebuilding (JICA n.d. a).

cross-sectoral integration of sustainability perspectives—such as climate change, biodiversity, human rights, and governance—and strengthened collaboration across humanitarian, development, and peace actors through the Humanitarian–Development–Peace (HDP) nexus to enhance resilience against various threats. In the next section, this essay will discuss the perspectives and the added value of human security in the era of compound crises.

2. Human Security Perspectives in an Era of Compound Crises

In an age that demands responses to compound crises, the importance of human security perspectives has grown even further. Based on JICA's experiences, three perspectives are particularly critical for translating human security as a guiding principle into practice: (1) focusing on individuals, (2) focusing on risks and threats, and (3) strategies that integrate protection, empowerment, and solidarity.

2.1. Focus on individuals: Responding to Interlinked Threats

Human security compels attention to the situation of each individual, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances, and calls for an examination of how complex and interconnected threats affect people's lives and the development of responses to these threats. Whereas sector-based analyses often fail to capture the full scope of complex crises that transcend sectors, examining impacts at the individual level provides a gateway for identifying cross-sectoral threats and promoting multisectoral and interdisciplinary responses.

In development cooperation, applying human security perspectives shifts attention away from national averages toward individuals, enabling greater consideration of poverty, inequality, gender, disability, youth, and other dimensions of vulnerability. Comprehensive risk and vulnerability analyses help identify blind spots in society and ensure that those most vulnerable to the effects of compound crises are not overlooked. In recent years, increasing attention has also been paid to well-being and to mental health and psychosocial

support (MHPSS), reflecting a deeper and more holistic focus on individuals, including their subjective feelings and psychological security (UNDP 2022b).

Consistent with the UNDP Special Report's emphasis on "agency," the capacity of individuals to mobilize their own capabilities in responding to threats lies at the core of human security.

2.2. Focus on Risks and Threats: Resilience Against Growing Risks

From its early stages, discussions at JICA highlighted that, in contrast to human development, human security places greater emphasis on downside risks (Mine 2006). Rather than focusing solely on improving indicators at a given point in time, human security emphasizes sustaining achievements and preventing setbacks from external shocks. In development cooperation, which often focuses on positive progress and forward-looking development, conscious attention to risks and threats, along with appropriate responses to them, is an important perspective that must not be overlooked.

In the era of compound crises, development challenges extend beyond economic growth to include strengthening resilience against crises. The stagnation in progress toward the SDGs reflects the emergence of large-scale downside risks since 2015, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts, including the war in Ukraine and the Gaza crisis. Preventing, mitigating, and responding to such risks is indispensable for achieving future development goals.

Resilience is no longer limited to specific sectors such as climate change, public health, peace, or disaster risk reduction; it has become a cross-cutting requirement across all sectors. Building resilient systems that protect people and enable effective responses to threats is increasingly necessary, regardless of the income level of each country.

2.3. Strategies of Protection, Empowerment, and Solidarity: Linking Local, National, Regional, and Global Levels

To address risks and threats, human security has offered concrete strategies centered on protection and empowerment. In an era when local threats are increasingly generated or

amplified by global crises, complementing these strategies with global solidarity has become particularly effective.

By combining protection and empowerment, societies can enhance their overall capacity to respond to crises through both improvements in government policies and institutions and strengthened individual and community capabilities. For JICA, this has meant greater awareness of the need to integrate traditional capacity development approaches with bottom-up initiatives to empower individuals and local communities.⁵ Traditional approaches often focused mainly on top-down protection mechanisms through government institutions.

Moreover, responding to interconnected threats across local, national, regional, and global levels requires multilayered cooperation involving individuals, communities, national governments, regional organizations, international organizations, international NGOs, and private-sector actors. Moving beyond solely local-level empowerment, effectively addressing compound crises entails linking grassroots initiatives with national policies, regional frameworks, and global public-private partnerships through solidarity-based cooperation.

3. The Current State of JICA's Human Security Practice

To realize human security amid compound crises characterized by interlinked threats from global to local levels, JICA is working on developing clearer strategies and approaches to realize human security while also advancing efforts to visualize risks and threats. At the same time, overcoming increasingly complex risks and threats requires

⁵ Capacity development (CD) is defined as “the process by which people, organizations, and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt, and maintain capacity over time,” while, as defined by the OECD DAC, capacity is the ability of people, organizations, and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully (Hosono et al. 2011). It is an approach that aims to enable developing countries themselves to take ownership of resolving their own development issues. Rather than seeking to “fill gaps” by transferring technology or materials from the outside, this approach emphasizes a “catalytic” role that provides partner countries with knowledge that supports their decision-making and actions, thereby enhancing their endogenous capacity (IFIC 2006b).

cross-sectoral initiatives, interdisciplinary research, and cooperation that bridges global and local levels. Co-creation of new solutions to new challenges with diverse partners has thus become indispensable to realizing human security.

3.1. Formulating Strategies and Approaches for Realizing Human Security

In order to respond to complex and interconnected threats, JICA is strengthening mechanisms for cooperation with partner country governments and local people in collaboration with diverse stakeholders. Reflecting on past efforts that emphasized mainstreaming human security at each project level—sometimes resulting in overly micro-level responses (Makino 2022)—JICA is now pursuing approaches that connect global threats with local impacts, going beyond project-level analysis, through the formulation of global sectoral strategies as well as regional and country strategies to realize human security.

JICA has formulated twenty thematic strategies known as the JICA Global Agendas (JGAs) (JICA n.d. b). JGAs, applying the three perspectives of human security described in the previous section, organize how sectoral challenges contribute to protecting individuals' lives, livelihoods, and dignity; identify key risks and threats; and propose concrete cooperation approaches that combine protection, empowerment, and solidarity to strengthen resilience. Regional and country strategies similarly analyze context-specific human security risks and threats and integrate relevant JGAs accordingly to address such risks and challenges in each region and country.

3.2. Quantifying and Visualizing Human Security

In order to advance such cooperation effectively, a shared understanding of the risks and threats to human security in each context is necessary. Because risks and threats to human security vary widely across settings, achieving a common and concrete understanding of which issues need to be addressed in each context is inherently challenging. Quantifying and visualizing human security—and tracking improvements using numerical indicators—can help foster shared recognition.

It is against this backdrop that the JICA Ogata Research

Institute has been engaged in discussions on methodologies and indicators for measuring human security, as introduced in other articles in this volume, including the use of indicator dashboards to visualize risks across countries and regions. Such tools can inform the formulation of region- and country-specific strategies based on identified risks and threats to human security in each region and country. JICA has also been attempting to use indicators to visualize improvements in human security achieved through JICA's cooperation and co-creation with partners in its sectoral strategies, or JGAs.

3.3. Co-Creation with Diverse Partners to Realize Human Security

As threats to human security grow more complex, cooperation among diverse partners from the global to the local level to co-create solutions to challenges is essential for protecting individuals' safety and security. Addressing emerging challenges requires co-creating new solutions with partner countries and through international collaboration rather than relying solely on standardized approaches based on the past experiences of developed countries. The realization of human security for all—including those in vulnerable situations—cannot be achieved by any single organization acting alone. Sharing an understanding of risks and threats and working together in a coordinated manner are imperative.

Human security is a concept that places importance on the context-specificity of each region, and rather than imposing a single solution, it calls for cooperation to jointly create solutions that are appropriate to that specific context. In a world where global crises affect local societies and threaten local values and dignity, as backlash against globalization and a return to the unique cultures and values of individual countries and regions are increasingly observed, ownership and respect for dignity are becoming even more important. There is a need to jointly develop new responses to crises while safeguarding the dignity of people in each country and region.

JICA aims to share and circulate the innovative solutions and social values generated through the promotion of co-creation between developing countries and Japan, as well as across a wider range of other countries. In other words, co-creation generates circulation of innovative solutions

throughout the global community (JICA 2026, 2–3). In an era of compound crises, such circular cooperation—in which diverse actors engage in mutual learning, co-create solutions to social challenges, and share them with each other—may create new possibilities for international cooperation to realize human security worldwide.

Conclusion: Toward Future Operationalization of Human Security

Over the past two decades, JICA has made sustained efforts to operationalize the concept of human security in the field. What began as an effort to link peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and development cooperation and to shift the focus from states alone to individuals and communities has evolved, over the decades, into an approach that emphasizes resilience against diverse threats. The three perspectives for operationalizing the human security concept—focus on the individual, focus on risks and threats, and strategies that integrate protection, empowerment, and solidarity—have become a source of added value to JICA's development cooperation.

In an era of compound crises, the importance of human security as a guiding principle for development cooperation will continue to grow. In response to the crises in which diverse threats are interconnected and cascading across multiple levels, from the local to the global, development cooperation is increasingly required to understand these threats in an interdisciplinary and comprehensive manner and to address them in an integrated way across local, national, regional, and global dimensions. At the same time, amid changes in the international order, major challenges remain as to how solidarity and co-creation can be fostered and whether a shared understanding of the pursuit of human security can be established.

Although the human security perspective—focusing on individuals rather than averages, holistic view rather than categorization by sectors, and resilience to diverse risks and threats rather than numerical indicators at a point in time—

may not align easily with conventional policy practices or purely quantitative target-setting, it reflects the real-world complexity faced by people on the ground. This can be seen as a major challenge faced by practitioners when attempting to operationalize human security. However, in today's world, where social challenges are complex and interconnected, simply categorizing problems and addressing them separately is often insufficient. What becomes crucial instead is the ability to interpret these complex interlinkages and to identify integrated solutions that enable people in diverse circumstances to prepare for future risks and threats. The complexity inherent in human security reflects the realities on the ground where people confront these challenges. Those who seek to practice human security must therefore continue, even today and in the future, to constantly pursue ways of responding to the demands that emerge from the challenges on the ground.

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