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Commons for Peace

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Although the term ‘human security’ has various meanings, two have predominated. Following the Cold War, several major studies—including the UN Secretary-General’s 1992 report, *Agenda for Peace*; the 1994 *World Development Report* of the UN Development Program; and the 2003 report, *Human Security Now*, by the UN Commission on Human Security—proposed peaceful alternatives to military security. This shifted the traditional meaning of security from national defense to social development and the rights of civilians. Meanwhile, a second branch of human security was examining reasons why the international community should intervene in a sovereign state, which jeopardizes the safety and security of its people through political violence or military aggression. The principle of *responsibility to protect (R2P)* was put forward by the 2001 report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty to bring peace and legal order to citizens whose lives are endangered by their own government.

While the human security field was moving in these different directions, another field was developing. In the 1970s, the Common Heritage movement was launched by Maltese Ambassador Arvid Parvo at the UN. It focused on global commons issues, including the seas and the atmosphere. A local commons movement has also emerged over the past several decades, led by scholar Elinor Ostrom and many others. Proponents say that the local management of natural and social commons is a security issue for the users and producers who depend upon them, whether these commons are traditional (irrigation ditches, pastures, indigenous cultures) or emerging (intellectual property, social networks, collaborative innovation).

Representatives from the two fields—human security and the commons—have seldom met. Yet the two groups have much to gain by coming together and comparing agendas. The situation is reminiscent of the way that representatives from the fields of environment and development, who did not know each other during the 1970s, launched the sustainable development movement in the 1980s and 90s. Similarly, an alliance of human security and the commons holds great potential now.

Peacekeeping the Commons: Similarities and Differences

The fields of human security and the commons both advocate the empowerment of local stakeholders in negotiating their own rules of order within disorderly environments. They agree that outside intervention in a locale or region is mostly unjustified (human security) or unnecessary (commons) when communities are able to make their own decisions in matters that directly affect them. Both fields would change the way that government provides security, although their interpretations vary.

The basic reason for alleviating material insecurity—through food, clean water, housing, health care, education, jobs and self-sustaining livelihoods—is to ensure people’s personal safety and survival in conditions of peace and dignity. Yet many of the

working principles of development—self-reliance, capacity-building and people’s participation in self-government, rule of law and local institutions—are reliant on outside aid and investment and deeply embedded in the state and inter-state system. Human security may call for com-

munity-based development, social well-being and popular self-determination, but the rights of local citizens preempt sovereign authority only during humanitarian crises—not when there is a military security threat. Since many analysts in the human security field view human rights and development as a legitimate part of the people’s social contract with their government, they challenge the issue of state sovereignty mainly in terms of the legitimacy of foreign intervention.

The commons field takes a different approach. It questions the effectiveness of the traditional model of human rights and development, stressing the importance of socially created value and the management of resources by local communities beyond the purview of government jurisdiction or market incentives. Rather than subjects of the state, civilians must be treated as people whose livelihoods are destroyed when they are separated from the social and natural wealth upon which they depend. Commoners want the state to provide greater security for the rights of citizens to produce and manage these resources and less support for their privatization. The commons thus provide a strong critique of the inequality and unrest that result from market forces. Destabilization of a commons may be caused by many factors, not the least of which are corporate-driven efforts to enclose and extract a valuable resource. This can result in the financing of social instability. It’s true that poverty, disease and lack of capacity or development by local people may be an immediate cause—or result—of failed commons. Yet the underlying reasons for failed commons, resource conflict and security crises often involve the meddling of the domestic state, a foreign state, or domestic or foreign businesses in the management and production of a community’s natural and social capital. The field of human security does not address this dimension of resource security.

At the same time, human security, with its realism concerning the alternatives to armed security, can be helpful to commons practitioners who view the commons in a political vacuum, isolated from state and regional influences. Commoners believe that communities can generate genuine livelihood and well-being simply by negotiating, monitoring and policing their own rules for resource management. But this minimizes the fact that state or regional conflict over the ownership and production of local stocks and supplies can pose major security problems—of infrastructure, governance, lawlessness, hostility and fear. In many cases, sudden and catastrophic changes in political regimes lead to radical and violent changes, disrupting the peace, security and well-being of a community’s ability to manage its commons.

While human security supports the protection of civilian interests through human rights, material relief and the mobilization of peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts, it places more emphasis on the personal safety of citizens than on specific means for the self-management of their commons. Commoners argue that well-intentioned proposals for human rights, social development and



The Sudanese Misseriya move south in the wet season with their cattle, in an annual migration to dry season pastures in the Abyei area. Conflicts are arising with other tribes over scarce water and grass. *left.* The Misseriya build thatched shelters during migration; *right.* A tribal girl migrates on a donkey

peacebuilding are often imposed on pre-existing commons and neglect the survival and subsistence needs of their resource communities, resulting in poverty, disrupted livelihoods and resource refugees. The uprooting and displacement of a population, crime, weapons and extremist ideologies are also cross-border problems, which is why a regional approach to human security may be necessary. Commons advocates often point out that sovereign jurisdictions and their social institutions rarely match the territorial expanse of ecosystems, social and cultural groupings and religious diasporas. Yet most commoners have little experience in the management of resource crises which transcend state boundaries.

Socially Chartered Agreements: Toward Resource Security

Both fields generally agree that sustainable security in particular areas should be established by the people who live there, since they are the ones most knowledgeable about potential solutions to their problems. Commoners assert that resource security cannot be guaranteed by people they don't know or trust, and many human security proponents agree that outside forces are not always the best source of citizen safety. Some advocates of human security support a participatory framework for peacekeeping, civilian protection and self-determination in disputed areas and conflict zones, one aspect of which is the local governance of community holdings and provisions which may be endangered.

Many resource communities have also developed *social charters* under peaceful conditions—declarations of their rights to produce and manage a commons—which involve a wide range of people who depend on these assets for their physical and material welfare. Socially chartered agreements allow citizens and local public officials to design effective policies and institutions specifically tailored to their circumstances. Social charters can also be created for regional commons by addressing the security of resources vital to all stakeholders in a transborder environment, such as water, food and energy. In strife-torn areas, social charters may include plans for peacekeepers to manage conflict and protect civilians. These peacekeeping measures could be financed through leases or taxes on the commons.

Commons for Peace: A Non-Closure Movement?

The challenge now for those who recognize the importance of Commons for Peace (C4P) is to define security as *non-closure*: the rolling back of new or existing property enclosures which deny the rights of people to their means of livelihood and welfare.

Government and market enclosures remove people from their sources of living wealth and sustenance, leading to failed commons and the potential for resource conflict and armed intervention. Proponents of human security, unlike commons activists, have generally not opposed state enclosure laws or privatization. This is probably the sharpest difference now between human security and the commons. Yet there is much common ground: *both fields agree on devolving power to local communities and the non-interference of outside forces. They converge on the creation of locally chartered agreements for the protection of civilians and their common goods, encouraging communities to flourish through legitimate local management. They also agree that peace itself is a social and cultural good, which must be locally managed and shared.*

As a democratic movement, Commons for Peace would defend the social protests that emerge from the destruction of a commons—or from any form of external control that does not promote life, human dignity, security and peace. Socially chartered agreements for the local production and management of commons are won through hard-fought but peaceful negotiations to protect them from enclosure, overuse and deterioration. This means safeguarding a community's sources of survival, sustenance and well-being by resisting abusive interference, whether domestic or foreign. C4P would speak for a third sector of popular will—the powerful force of people who are infuriated by losing not only the benefits of access, use, production and governance of their commons, but also the safety and security which only this natural and social capital can offer. The indignation of C4P must be focused through the determination of communities to reclaim their commons non-violently and redefine the boundaries of resource domains threatened by further enclosure and exploitation.

Neither human security nor the commons are concepts currently recognized in mainstream society. All the more reason that these fields should join forces. C4P would demonstrate that human rights, poverty, disease, food, health, education, political participation and the peaceful management of resource conflict can no longer be separated from the commons. Indeed, nothing is more vital to the peace and security of individuals and communities across the world today than the long-term preservation of their commons.

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