



POLICY BRIEF



Santiago, Chile street posters demanding justice, including in the state killing of Mapuche activist Camilo Catrillanca. Source: Kelly Bauer

How state-centric human security agendas can undermine Indigenous rights and security

Authors: Lauren Marie Balasco and Kelly Bauer

Despite international recognition of Indigenous rights, too frequently the human security of Indigenous communities is sacrificed in the name of state policy priorities that discount their specific security and autonomy demands.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

How do Indigenous rights and demands fit within the evolving human security paradigm? Human security – understood as the protection against long-term as well as sudden violent threats to the safety, livelihood, and rights of individuals and communities – sheds light on the various ways that different groups conceive of security, assert those demands to the state, and how the state acts on those demands.

KEY RESULTS

- In Chile and Peru, Indigenous communities frame state-led trade and development projects as threats to their human security and, in turn, governments use anti-terrorism and national security laws to discredit their demands.
- States selectively enforce legislation from their authoritarian pasts to implement development projects that conflict with the security prerogatives of Indigenous populations.
- Violent escalations of political conflict between the state and Indigenous communities weaken democratic institutions and undermine protections for Indigenous rights and autonomy.

But what happens when multiple actors draw on similar human security rhetoric to advance conflicting agendas? While Indigenous communities confront pressing threats, political leaders have pit Indigenous human security demands against that of the wider public and against national security.

“Human security – understood as the protection against long-term as well as sudden violent threats to the safety, livelihoods, and rights of individuals and communities.”

To understand how this contestation over human security plays out in both policy and rhetoric, Lauren Balasco (Stockton University) and Kelly Bauer (Nebraska Wesleyan University) analyze how the priorities, demands, and threats faced by Indigenous communities are at times constructed as clashing with not only the state’s national security priorities, but also with the human security of the wider population. Using qualitative comparative research in Chile and Peru, the authors identify points of tension that emerge when a human security paradigm is articulated by actors with conflicting interests and power differentials.

KEY FINDINGS

In Chile and Peru, Indigenous communities frame state-led trade and development projects as threats to their human security and, in turn, governments use anti-terrorism and national security laws to discredit their demands.

The [Baguazo](#) and [Aymarazo](#) crises in Peru show how Indigenous and state security agendas can clash, sometimes violently. During these conflicts over economic development projects, the state attempted to frame Indigenous protesters as terrorists and threats to public safety, in order to discredit their claims and activism, and justify police and military repression of peaceful protests. In response, Indigenous leaders called out the state’s actions as an imminent threat to their communities’ security and livelihoods, and justified the use of violence as self-defense. In [Chile](#), the mobilization of

Indigenous Mapuche leaders, activists, and communities against extractive projects since the 1980s has resulted in similar clashes between Indigenous communities and the state.

States selectively enforce legislation from their authoritarian pasts to implement development projects that conflict with the security prerogatives of Indigenous populations.

By framing Indigenous demands as security threats, the Chilean and Peruvian governments justify their use of legislation and security tactics from their authoritarian past. This is done to invoke silence and fear among leaders and activists who mobilize against development projects that threaten Indigenous ancestral land and livelihoods. For example, in Chile, in response to Mapuche communities’ protests, the state invoked a 1984 anti-terrorism law, framing and criminalizing the protests as efforts to “undermine the Chilean Government’s legitimate authority and legal jurisdiction” (Ministerio del Interior 1984).

Violent escalations of political conflict between the state and Indigenous communities weaken democratic institutions and undermine protections for Indigenous rights and autonomy.

Rights to self-determination – including rights to prior consultation and guardianship – are important legal recognitions and protections for the security of Indigenous communities (Burgos González 2006; Holder & Corntassel 2002; Shelton 2014). When Indigenous communities exercise those rights to protect themselves against existential threats (such as extractive development projects), they often confront violence from the state which renders those rights vulnerable and undermines the democratic process that ensures their recognition and representation. When a government criminalizes protests, portrays Indigenous activists as criminals and terrorists, and weaponizes the legal system to undermine human rights, the legitimacy and strength of a country’s democracy deteriorates.

POLICY INSIGHTS

There is still a gap between conversations about human security on the global stage and those happening at the local level.

“Human security” is a concept developed by the international policy-making community and, as such, does not always reflect how local communities themselves embrace it. When states use human security justifications to argue in favor of development projects that clash with the priorities and demands of local communities, tensions emerge. State-centric conceptualizations of human security can therefore serve to obscure, abstract, and disregard communities’ lived experiences, and exclude critical voices that ground and enrich real human security.

The concept of “Indigenous human security” calls attention to the contradictions that exist when national human security prerogatives collide with Indigenous demands.

We advance the concept of “Indigenous human security” to call attention to how Indigenous communities’ needs, threats, and demands can differ from those of the wider population and the state. Indigenous human security implies the security priorities of Indigenous communities may be distinct (although sometimes overlapping) from those of the majority, and may stand in opposition to traditional state notions of national security.

Policy makers should be cautious and recognize which claims and whose interests are protected in public discourse on human security. In addition to identifying how human security rhetoric is used to advance a specific development agenda by political leaders, policy makers and advocates should seek out leaders from marginalized communities and pay heed to their perspectives. The design of human security-based policies and programs should incorporate a variety of voices to ensure that the advancement of livelihoods, security, and opportunity for some does not come at the expense of historically marginalized groups.

Contested approaches to human security reveal the tensions between the state and Indigenous communities even in democratic contexts.

Human security has limits (Hudson 2018). It is important to understand a government’s motivation for advancing specific human security rhetoric and, in turn, what Indigenous communities may have to gain or lose in accepting such a paradigm, or what it means for their autonomy. As Shilliam (2013, 92) warns, the “incorporation of Indigenous rights into the human security framework has an implicit colonizing effect in so far as Indigenous worldviews must be assimilated into a developmentalist mindset.” The relationships Indigenous communities build with the state are frequently tenuous. Policy makers should pay close attention not to sacrifice the rights, autonomy, and sovereignty of Indigenous Peoples to state-centric trade and development projects or coercive conceptualizations of human security. Indeed, Indigenous sovereignty is integral to advancing Indigenous human security (Guedel 2014; Tauli-Corpuz 2020).

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