What Does "Human Security" Inform Us During the COVID-19 Pandemic? *

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This paper attempts to explore contentions between states' robust disease prevention measures and individual rights observed during the COVID-19 pandemic and examine what the notion of human security informs us in encountering COVID-19. After introducing the notion of human security, the paper identified two important effects that COVID-19 has revealed in each country and around the world. By understanding the effects, the paper explores contentions that have arisen between states' measures undertaken to prevent further spread of the pandemic and the rights of individuals. Based on these explorations, it examines the true meaning of the notion of human security to protect individual's rights and diversity of the society in threat contexts like the pandemic.

1. Introduction

The concept of human security which once gained fanfare and was soon criticized due to its ambitious and all-encompassing nature, which limits operationalization, has now re-draw attention as a useful framework to protect the vulnerable people in a time of COVID-19. In 2020, for example, the United Nations (UN) released a newsletter titled "the importance of human security in an age of COVID-19."[1] The newsletter featured diverse voices by Nobel laureates and thought leaders to utilize human security to tackle the pandemic. Many scholars would have been indeed reminded of the concept of human security in encountering varied challenges brought by COVID-19.

Beyond the significant loss of life, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a rise in unemployment, suicide, and economic crisis around the world. The sudden appearance of an unknown coronavirus in early 2020, or some may say in late 2019, exhibited that it is not merely a health crisis but series of crises that touch on people's survival, wellbeing, livelihood, and dignity. The pandemic demonstrated that we are indeed in the middle of

an all-encompassing threat. In other words, the notion of human security that made us realize inextricable links among diverse threats surrounding us is not an unrealistic or hedonistic concept like once criticized, but it is a warning notion that one threat can potentially damage one's life, wellbeing, livelihood, and dignity at the same time by leading a series of crises.

This paper attempts to explore contentions and dilemmas between state policy choices to prevent further spread of COVID-19 and individual rights highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic and examines what the notion of human security informs us in encountering COVID-19. It particularly focuses on revealing how individual cultural/religious rights and state decisions based on robust disease prevention systems and economic systems have become threats toward another and affected our wellbeing with knock-on effects.

2. Human Security Revisited

The notion of human security came to be well-recognized in 1994 when the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s *Human Development Report* introduced the concept. In the report, security was equated with people rather than territories, denoting development rather than arms (UNDP 1994). It focused more on sustainable human development and human security as a new form of development cooperation. The notion was then more elaborated by a renowned report, *Human Security Now,* published by the Commission on Human Security. The report emphasized the importance of the security of individuals for effective security measures together with the security of the state (CHS 2003). One of the striking issues in the report was to advocate for such issues as the security of an individual in terms of his or her 'vital freedom' for empowering people on the move, protecting people, and aiding those dealing with economic security.

Since the 1990s, a plethora of books and articles have been published that feature the concept of human security both in theory and practice. While most issues covered under the notion of human security have been in the effort of UN activities as demonstrated in such reports as 'In larger freedom' and 'We the peoples' by Kofi Annan, among others, in reality, security and development have been handled by different agencies and as a separate agenda until the end of the 1990s. This is largely because of operational rationality based on the division of labour. The notion of human security had, in a sense, become a wake-up call for those who are involved in development and security-related

work in a real context, where the demarcation of security and development is not necessarily useful nor makes any sense.

The notion of human security was formally agreed upon at the UN General Assembly in September 2012 (UN General Assembly A/66/763).[2] At that time, it made clear 'the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. All individuals, especially vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential' (UN 2016). The inclusion of dignity in the notion of human security was welcomed by many non-governmental organizations, as it includes intended and unintended discrimination, harassment, and social deprivation, both material and non-material.

Nevertheless, in over thirty years since the international appearance of the concept in the 1990s, before the COVID-19 pandemic, few books explore human security in relation to a pandemic or public health. For example, while an edited volume comprised of 25 chapters, Routledge Handbook of Human Security (Martin and Owen eds. 2014), covers various issues related to the notion of human security, such as conflict, war, food, and natural disasters, it does not include any topic related to infectious diseases, public health, or pandemic. Even some books that focused on Africa also miss relevant topics related to public health or infectious diseases, although the continent has been in serious threat to public health due to the spread of Ebola Haemorrhagic Fever (Ebola) or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).[3] Whilst public health has been considered a part of the security agenda,[4] health issues were rarely studied in the framework of human security until we encountered the real threat arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

3. Implications of COVID-19 for Human Security

Why did the notion of human security come to draw attention again after the COVID-19 pandemic? What key implications in relation to human security can we extract from the COVID-19 pandemic in our society? While the notion of human security had developed in diverse contexts by the 2000s, the COVID-19 pandemic and following economic and socio-political drawbacks also help us to review the notion of human security. This section, therefore, identifies two important effects that we have observed as a result of the pandemic in 2020. These effects entail important implications for reviewing the meaning of human security in an age of COVID-19.

The Revealing Effect

The crisis brought by COVID-19 was not a crisis that some scientists or institutions had not foreseen. Although transnational health threats are always invisible, they come from everywhere in the globalized world. In fact, as an objective reality, all individuals, irrespective of their status, class, nationality, race, and gender, are potentially threatened by transnational health threats as we've just experienced. In the past several decades, there were also sporadic public health threats at different times and in varied regions, such as SARS, MERS, H1N1, and Ebola. Nevertheless, the real effects of such threats arising from transnational public health are diverse and not all people were equally at risk. The COVID-19 pandemic has exhibited the reality that some are more at risk, depending on where they live, what nationality they have and what social status they have, and in some places their religion, ethnicity, or economic and social status did matter. In other words, inequality, asymmetries, and hierarchies in human relations within each county, as well as in the relations between states, matter. Such inequalities and asymmetries have become evident when the vaccine for COVID-19 has become available only in certain countries in 2020.

Nonetheless, such inequality, asymmetries, and hierarchies are not new even in international relations. The COVID-19 pandemic merely highlighted the pre-existing structural conditions within each country and in the global context through the way the effects of the disease appear, the access to treatment, and the access to vaccination. This is largely because international relations and domestic socio-political and economic structures are often shaped by varied power relations, including gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, among others. For example, in Thailand, it has become apparent that it was migrant workers, mostly from Myanmar, who suffered most from COVID-19 in the second wave of infection in the country,[5] while in Singapore, migrant workers were infected by COVID-19 at three times the average domestic rate (HRWG 2020).[6] Singapore's foreign workers are low-wage migrant labourers mostly from South Asia and are largely employed in the manufacturing and construction sectors. In these countries, COVID-19 flourished in long-repressed populations who have been left in ill-treatment. For that reason, COVID-19 has a 'revealing effect', which highlights those who have been in poor treatment in each society or country.

Even in some countries where there is no such pre-existing marginalization or discrimination against minority groups, the pandemic has enhanced the existing social or political divisions in each county. Dr. Joyce Dalsheim, a guest speaker of this research project, indeed pointed out that wearing a mask is now used to show the political position

of the person in the United States (US). [7] The comment illustrates how pre-existing political divisions, as demonstrated by the 2020 presidential election in the US, were affected by COVID-19 because political leaders' approaches and measures to handle COVID-19 were politicized or used as political tools to obtain and express support. It is commonly seen in any country that certain elements are utilized as political tools in general and in crisis contexts, in particular, because policy choices directly affect people's wellbeing and living. Accordingly, socio-political divisions, discrimination, or marginalization are likely to be more highlighted along the pre-existing fault lines in each society in threat contexts or emergency situations.

The Knock-on Effect

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that local solutions vary even within each country and across countries. Some countries imposed mandatory lockdowns, while other countries took more voluntary measures to limit the spread of coronavirus. Accordingly, although the objective conditions brought by COVID-19 were initially shared by all people around the world, some analysts argue that the way each government handled the situation resulted in significantly different effects on individuals and, as a result, some effects were considered an outcome of the government's policy-choices and decisions. Therefore, certain aspects of suffering, though originated from the COVID-19 pandemic, were considered man-made.

In such a broader context, in which the state policy choices significantly affect one's life, there were also various types of knock-on effects observed around the world during the pandemic in 2020. To grasp knock-on effects, as explored in the previous section, pre-existing conditions, both in terms of the structural and procedural, bear great importance. This is because those suffering most from COVID-19 were often those who have been socially, economically, and culturally marginalized in each country, although they might have not been so clearly observed before the pandemic. The failure of Singapore's response to COVID-19 was, for example, principally caused by its long history of the deprived treatment of migrant workers who have been unprotected and left out from any protection from the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated job security, labour rights, and wage-related issues for migrant workers, although the roots of these issues exist in the pre-pandemic policies of the country, which ignored the rights and wellbeing of migrant workers (HRWG 2020: 114). In Japan, a Japanese newspaper reported that women's suicide rate significantly increased in the second wave of the

COVID-19 infection in 2020.[8] Some analysts pointed out that Japanese women's multiple responsibilities at home as a mother, wife, and daughter-in-law, in addition to their responsibility at the workplace, have been exacerbated by varied changes as a result of measures undertaken in response to the pandemic while many women lost their jobs, often fixed-term or part-time, due to the deteriorating economy during the pandemic. Japanese women's job security, employment opportunities, and their wellbeing were seriously affected by the pandemic and governmental measures undertaken for robust control of the pandemic.

The effect of COVID-19 is, therefore, not merely on direct health-related issues but also on economic, social, and cultural-related issues and severely impacts the most vulnerable groups of society because the pandemic has affected the global economy, thus deteriorating domestic economies, threatening individual job and wage security, affecting individual wellbeing, and ultimately endangering mental and psychological security. Such a series of crises are considered a 'knock-on effect' of COVID-19. Moreover, due largely to the nature of the pandemic, it enhanced xenophobic and discriminatory tendencies towards such groups as foreigners, including migrants, refugees, and temporal visitors. Discrimination and marginalization increased towards various minorities, whether ethnic, religious, sexual, or linguistic, as they have been considered 'others' even before the pandemic.

While many people suffered from socio-economic effects arising from the COVID-19 pandemic to varying degrees, measures undertaken to handle COVID-19 more seriously affected the vulnerable people of each country, who have experienced the knock-on effect in multiple ways.

4. The Inevitable Contentions

The focus of this research project must be also discussed in a deep understanding of the above-mentioned revealing and knock-on effects of COVID-19. In most countries, policy choices are made by political leaders who dominate and control laws, institutions, and public policy choices under the state system or in a sovereign state. Irrespective of the form of governance and the relationship between state and religion, in many countries, the legal and procedural measures adopted by the authorities to prevent COVID-19 have affected the practice of religion around the world.

Even in secular states, it is commonly seen that national legislation contains legal

norms that guarantee the freedom of individual beliefs and religion, which assumingly includes such practices as collective worship and other religious practices. There are, however, certain limits, usually inherent in the national legal framework in relation to the freedom of religion, because it is common for most countries to include the fundamental rights of other persons in their constitutions. A distinction exists on the point that some countries take legally binding measures with possible punishments in cases of violation, while other countries are not equipped with such legally binding measures. What measures can be undertaken by the government in countries that have no constitutional or legal regulations, therefore, depend on the political decisions to be taken that frame the laws and institutional mechanisms in threat contexts.

In varied threat contexts in each state, the rights of individuals are often restricted by such constitutional measures of 'public welfare' or 'national security.' Therefore, contentions are inevitable between the rights of individuals and what may be termed 'public good' or 'social welfare.' On this point, the World Health Organisation (WHO), in fact, made a statement that '[a]ll countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights.'[9] It was indeed not only the WHO but also many others, including the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN experts, who emphasized the importance of respecting the rights of individuals, particularly minorities and marginalized people during the pandemic. As illustrated by these warnings by international organizations, contentions between governmental measures taken for public good or national security and the rights of individuals in each country are commonly seen in emergency or threat contexts.

There have been two important phenomena commonly observed around the world concerning the contentions between the rights of individuals and the COVID-19 response, although different degrees. Firstly, in countries that have been in a protracted conflict between the state and non-state groups, where marginalization of particular groups have been recognized, the public health emergency arising from COVID-19 exhibited clearer tendencies of quashing dissent or targeting particular groups or individuals, such as Uighurs in China and the Shincheonji Church (a marginalized religious group) in South Korea (USCIR 2020: 2-3). The rights of individuals of particular groups or non-state actors against the state have not been protected. Secondly, even in countries that have had no such conflict or authoritarian tendencies, the government's policies or decisions tended to put more weight on robust measures to control the pandemic based on scientific evidence with evidence-based policy choices for 'public good.'

Contentions are inevitable under the state system, regardless of the nature of the threat, as an individual's needs, desires, and beliefs do not always meet with collective social, political, or economic good and gains. For this reason, the discourse of national or state security has been dominant in both theory and practice in threat contexts in order to protect many or the majority for maintaining support and legitimacy of the state. In most countries, the constitutions contain such collective security clause(s) as national security law, emergency decree, or a clause of public or social welfare to take strong measures in cases of emergency while also including such clauses as the rights and duties of individuals or human rights. Nonetheless, what constitutes threats for national security and emergency are usually not clearly defined in the constitution and thus it highly depends on political judgment in each context. The members of the 'political community' or a sovereign state are, in that sense, expected to find an appropriate or pragmatic balance between national security and individual rights at each time, depending on the nature of the threat and available choices among other conditions surrounding them, and thus decisions for measures to be taken are often politicized for the benefit of influential or particular groups in the process.

Religious Freedom in a Time of COVID-19

The above-mentioned contentions and dilemma are observed between measures undertaken for robust prevention of COVID-19 and religious freedom. Many national and local governments as well as religious authorities indeed grappled with how to balance religious freedom and measures undertaken to fight against the coronavirus. While religious gatherings are vital for people to share and practice their beliefs, they easily become sites for the spread of COVID-19. By the same token, as this research project principally addresses, specific and meaningful customs around death, which every religion has, consist of the right of individuals and religious freedom while public health measures in countering COVID-19 resulted in limiting these rights.

Varied religions have their protocols for cleaning the body to features of the funeral service, which includes religious obligations. Even simply exploring the practice of cremation vis-a-vis customs and traditions among different religions, some religions do not practice cremation and even some of them prohibit cremation[10]. Nevertheless, in taking robust preventive measures against COVID-19, the right of individuals or religious freedom exemplified by non-cremation fell into a dilemma as cremation has become the only choice in some countries due largely to public health considerations. This is exactly what has been previously discussed: contentions between public health considerations

symbolized as 'national' security and religious freedom or the right of belief epitomized by human security.

In the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), freedom of religion is guaranteed (Article 18). However, countries usually allow restricting religious freedom by law when necessary in, for example, the state of emergency or for a legitimate state interest. For this reason, the balance between national security considerations and human security considerations is vital. Religious freedom is so fundamental that some activists emphasize the derogation of the right even in times of public emergency. In some countries, governments, in fact, asked religious groups to voluntarily undertake necessary measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. Governments must balance the fundamental right even in their efforts to counter the virus in order not to target certain religious communities.

5. Concluding Remarks: Human Security for Inclusiveness and Diversity

The notion of human security appeared when state discourse was dominated by management and control of security in threat contexts around the globe and within each state in order to more carefully examine such threat contexts from the individual to the state perspective. Nonetheless, when an unknown security threat appears like the emergence of an unfamiliar coronavirus or indiscriminate terrorism, the discourse of national security tends to dominate over the discourse of individual security for prompt actions and robust prevention of further threat(s) for 'public good.' The government's policy choice then unintendedly or intendedly marginalizes certain groups of people. The COVID-19 pandemic indeed exhibited such tendencies of national security dominance in a sudden threat context. For this reason, analyzing the crisis from a human security perspective together with a national security perspective is vital to identify who are left out in the given policy choices and who need special care and attention to be protected. It should not be misunderstood that the notion of human security does not categorically deny the national security discourse. Instead, a human security perspective is to identify the most vulnerable groups in certain policy choices in a threat context and it is a way not to leave any person behind because those who are left behind are the ones who suffer from the most serious knock-on effects in threat contexts.

In that sense, the notion of human security is a warning sign for us that in situations

where overt or extreme tendencies, mechanized rational choice for majoritarian good, or rational policy choices ruled solely by scientific evidence for the benefit of a particular group of people are employed, often the majority may not always stand by diverse needs and beliefs of the people. Achieving human security means finding a way forward with diverse categories of people in a society who have different beliefs, needs, and values. The human security perspective then will help us to know who is outside such beneficiaries and what measures are necessary to include them under the given policy choices. In a certain context, an analysis from a human security perspective may urge a radical change in the policies made from a national security perspective.

In the COVID-19 pandemic, a human security perspective helps us to know whose rights were restricted while robust prevention measures of COVID-19 have been undertaken for public good by the government. The process for achieving human security itself requires overcoming contentions and dilemmas between the realization of public good and the protection of individual needs/rights. Accordingly, it is necessary to seek for appropriate balance between national and human security. Only in that way, we are able to live in a county that values 'inclusiveness' and 'diversity', and only such counties and societies will be resilient to such tendencies of 'exclusion' and 'uniformity' that the people tend to fall victim to in crisis contexts.

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Notes

[1] The newsletter is accessible on the following site. <https://www.un.org/humansecurity/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/United-Nations-Human-Security-Newsletter-Summer-2020-min.pdf> (accessed on 29 January 2021).

[2] "Follow-up to General Assembly resolution 64/291 on human security". Available online: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1228537.pdf> (12 February 2021).

[3] For example, *Sustainable Development and Human Security in Africa* does not include issues related to the public health or pandemic. See Picard et.al. (eds.) (2015)

[4] See, for example, O'Manique and Fourie (eds.) (2018).

[5] Information by Dr. Sriprapha Petcharamesree, a guest lecturer of this research project, who lectured on "Between Medical Precaution and Religious/Cultural Rights for Performing the Postmortem in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic" on 31 January 2021 (Webinar).

[6] Singapore's daily report of the government on 22 June 2020 stated that 94.31% of the positive cases of COVID-19 was at foreign worker dormitories and construction sites. See HRWG (2020) Chapter 5.

[7] Her comment on 10 January 2021 at her lecture on 'Memory, meaning and pandemic in Jewish Ultra-Orthodox Communities: what is essential?' (Webinar).

[8] Although more thorough studies are required to identify the causes of such suicide, women's multiple responsibilities as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law expected at home, along with the higher ratio of temporary employment among women in Japan, are said to be some of the major reasons for the increase in the number of suicides among women in the second wave of COVID-19. See Tokyo Newspaper, 15 January 2021.

[9] A statement made by the Director General on 11 March 2020. See the WHO website.

[10] For example, Orthodox Judaism, Islam and the Eastern Orthodox Church do not cremate.