



# Human Security: Implications for Public Health

Technical Reference Document



**Pan American  
Health  
Organization**



Regional Office of the  
World Health Organization



# Executive Summary

The ultimate objective of human security is to protect and ensure three essential freedoms for individuals and communities: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity. This framework provides a wider and deeper purpose to actions in health by linking them to the myriad aspects of human freedom and fulfillment. It provides the lens for focusing local integration of a multifaceted person-centered approach. *Human security* and *public health* are mutually beneficial concepts that can contribute to significant advances in community-based health settings. They shed light on how people's lack of basic security across seven key dimensions—economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political—leads to severe, permanent health damage. Public health creates an entry point for human security approaches by offering good practices to utilize for achieving a basic level of human security. Public health and human security are positioned to mutually complement each other, particularly given their shared dual emphasis on protection and empowerment strategies. This dual emphasis seeks to build community capacity while keeping institutions and state actors accountable. While these concepts and their relationship to each other are gaining wider recognition and momentum, there is still a continued need for development and advancement of the concepts of human security and health, as well as guidelines and tools for their successful application in the Region.<sup>1</sup> This *Technical Reference Document* is embedded in the context of the Region of the Americas, as an effort to advance the discussion of the human security concept and its relation to health following recommendations 2a and 2b

<sup>1</sup> The PAHO/WHO Region of the Americas is defined as the States and territories of the Western Hemisphere; the geographical area from Canada in the north to Patagonia in the south and includes the Caribbean.

of PAHO Resolution CD50.R16, *Health, Human Security and Well-being*.<sup>2</sup>

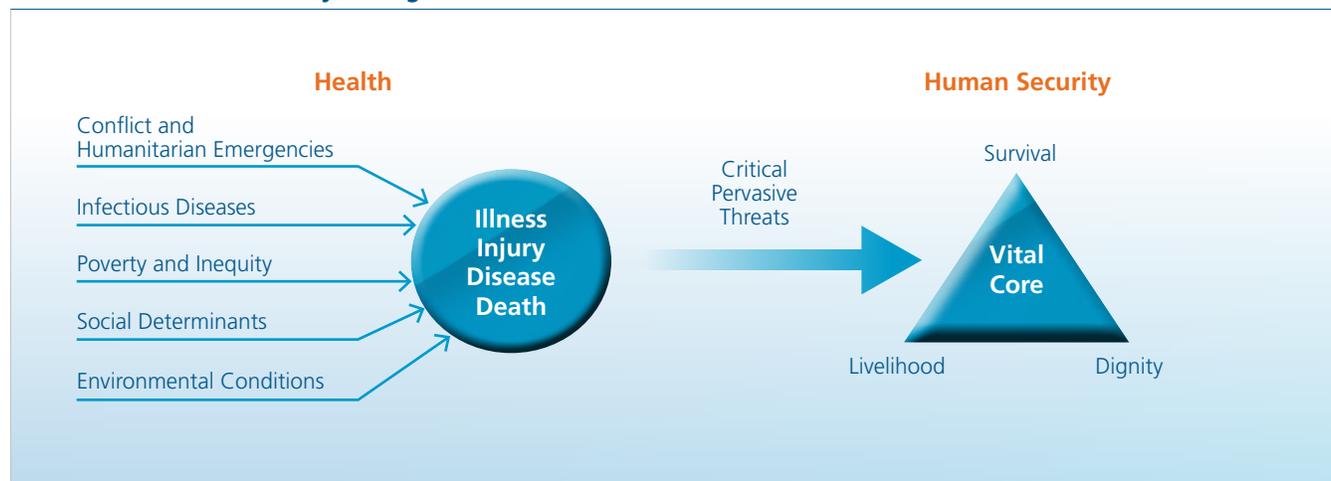
The United Nations Commission on Human Security (CHS) defined the objective of human security as the following: "to protect the vital core of all human lives from critical and pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term fulfillment."<sup>3</sup> Human security intersects with and complements the objectives of human development, human rights, and traditional state-centered security efforts. However, key principles guiding human security distinguish this approach from the aforementioned other related concepts. Specifically, human security is guided by people-centered, comprehensive, multisectoral, context-specific, and prevention-focused principles. Human security is also defined by its emphasis on both *protective measures*—typically top-down approaches for which states and institutions maintain the majority of responsibility and oversight—and *empowerment strategies*—which build the capacity of individuals and communities to effectively advocate for and bring about the conditions necessary for their security. By integrating protection and empowerment, this dual approach leads to contextually relevant and coordinated actions through which individuals and communities may increase their resilience and achieve sustainable improvements in their own security.

Considering these attributes, many parallels can be drawn between human security and public health approaches, which are both complementary and mutually reinforcing. In

<sup>2</sup> Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO). *50<sup>th</sup> Directing Council. Resolution CD50.R16, Health, Human Security and Well-being*. Washington, DC: PAHO/WHO; 2010.

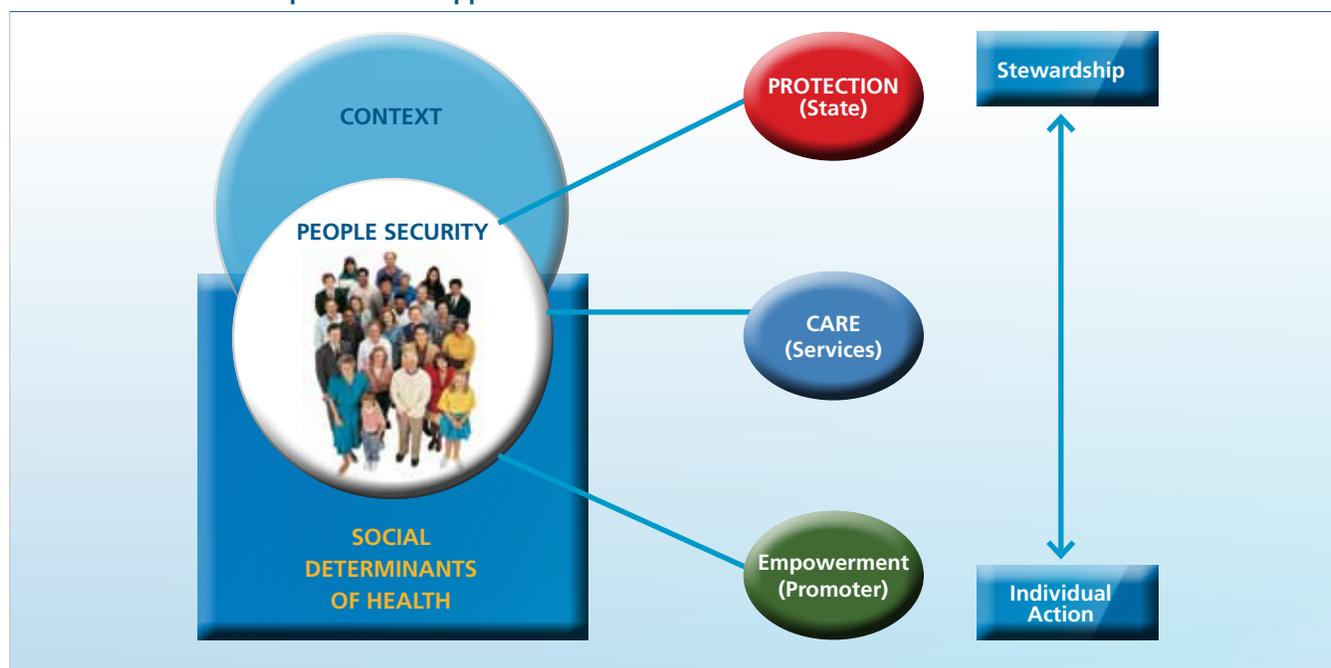
<sup>3</sup> United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN), Human Security Unit (UN/OCHA/HISU), Human Security Commission. *Human Security Now: The Final Report*, Chapter 6, Better Health for Human Security, p. 96. New York: UN; 2003.

## Health and Human Security Linkages



Graphic Modified from 'VitalCore' Model developed by the Human Security Commission and presented in *Human Security NOW* 2003.

## The Dual Protection/Empowerment Approach



fact, “illness, disability and avoidable death are ‘critical pervasive threats’ to human security.”<sup>4</sup> Health is defined here as not merely the absence of disease, but rather as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being.”<sup>5</sup> Health is both objective physical wellness and subjective psychosocial well-being and confidence *vis-à-vis* the future.

The role of public health to protect and promote the health of populations is thus both integral to and reflective of human security approaches. Like human security approaches, public health views threats to health comprehensively and addresses root causes—or determinants—at the individual, community, and societal level. As such, public health involves a multidisciplinary approach that integrates actions across multiple sectors and at different stages of various processes: proactive promotion of community and personal health assets and resources, prevention, promotion, care, and rehabilitation. Participatory approaches and community empowerment are underlying doctrines for public health: they recognize that individuals and communities *themselves* are key actors in the production of health and its necessary preconditions. In addition to these areas of alignment between the *principles* of human security and public health, the *practice* of public health presents potential opportunities to implement and more fully realize human security.

**Health promotion** is the key public health strategy for human security. Health promotion is an extensively practiced discipline within public health that seeks to achieve health improvements by building the capacity of individuals, families, and communities—while at the same time, also addressing conditions within society as a whole (e.g., healthy

settings, public policies, the preventive orientation of health services). Thus, health promotion practices are in accordance with the operational principle of empowerment.

It is important to note that public health activities are not carried out exclusively through the health sector but rather are implemented across multiple sectors (e.g., education, labor, and agriculture). Therefore, they occupy a special place in the network through which human security operates. This is particularly true because **primary health care service delivery** provides individuals and communities with a gateway into the broader health care system, as well as to services in other sectors. As such, primary health care systems provide a direct population link through which equitable access to essential services may be advanced.

The implementation of **social protection** schemes is also a crucial element to increase populations’ resilience to vulnerability. Schemes to provide social protection in health are especially important. Such measures are designed to guarantee, through public authorities, that individuals or groups can meet their health needs and demands through adequate access to services—regardless of their ability to pay.

The **stewardship functions of public health**—which involve government actions to inform, monitor, formulate, and enforce policies and other protective measures—also provide significant opportunities to implement and achieve human security.

The **identification, analysis, and application of synergies** between human security and public health approaches holds special importance to the Region of the Americas, where populations suffer critical vulnerabilities related to health and human security. These vulnerabilities include, but are not limited to communicable and noncommunicable disease; water

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and sanitation; environmental threats and toxic exposure; natural disasters; climate change; nutrition and food security; alcohol and drug use; violence; labor risks (whether insufficient, unsuitable, harmful, or age-inappropriate jobs); issues plaguing the informal sector; weaknesses in social protection measures and primary health care systems; housing and unplanned urban/metropolitan growth; and migration patterns, among others. Populations in situations of vulnerability, such as indigenous peoples and migrants, are of particular concern for the Region of the Americas. The key document on health and human security in the Region is PAHO Directing Council Resolution CD50.R16, *Health, Human Security and Well-being*. This constitutes the first multilateral document wherein Member States agree “to continue to promote analysis of the concept of human security and its relationship with health, with a view to its incorporation into country health plans,” making a “request to the Director to:

- a. monitor the progress of human security and health discussions in multilateral forums;
- b. explore development of methodological tools and guidelines for implementing human security and health integrated approaches;
- c. promote debate of these issues and approaches in the Organization; and
- d. promote awareness of these among PAHO personnel and Member States.”<sup>6</sup>

The evolution of *health and human security* from a concept to a field of action has been accompanied by a growing body of knowledge on this subject. Important concepts included in this body of knowledge, as well as related ones, are described in this document: e.g., citizen security, state security, social determinants of health, climate change, and *health and human security*, among others. Further rationales for adopting and promoting health and human security concepts were identified during the *Subregional Consultation Workshops* in Central America (held in Panama and in Nicaragua) and the *International Technical Discussion Meeting* held in Washington, DC.

**Implementing health and human security approaches** presents a particular challenge, given the evolving nature of our understanding of these approaches and their relationship to each other. Some projects have been developed that resemble the health and human security approach. Case studies developed on the basis of experiences with these projects can facilitate the development of a more complete framework for practicing human security, as well as for expanding public health approaches. Lessons learned from case studies such as these may help provide more guidance for effective response to many of the most dire threats posed to the security of the Region’s populations.

<sup>6</sup> Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO). *50th Directing Council. Resolution CD50.R16, Health, Human Security and Well-being*. Washington, DC: PAHO/WHO; 2010.

## Next Steps in Implementation

Currently, the challenge is to provide support to countries as they incorporate the concept of human security and its relation to health into country health plans (as mandated in aforementioned Resolution CD50.R16). Future steps in support of this goal fall into the following categories: **conceptual, methodological, operational, and theoretical**.

- **Key conceptual actions** in human security approaches and their application include expanding the dialogue on the topic and promoting information exchange and interagency collaboration.
- **Key methodological actions** include identifying and developing tools and methods, such as a *Human Security Index* and an analysis of social fabric and development. These will provide useful measurements of the conditions affecting health and human security that communities and other actors can then leverage to address vulnerabilities. In addition, existing community health and development approaches and methods should be renewed—and their scope, broadened—so that elements of community and family asset development, strengthening, and resilience are more fully addressed and made applicable in community-based primary health care contexts.
- **Key operational measures** include developing the infrastructural, organizational, and professional capacity within the public health and health care sectors to improve their ability to systemically approach critical and pervasive threats, in a multifaceted and participatory manner that also ensures protective actions on an equitable basis. Both the concepts and the tools necessary to bring about human security should be incorporated across all service levels and sectors and adopted within the communities themselves.
- Finally, advancement of **key theoretical measures** is important in order to more clearly define the concept of human security and its relation to health. This document describes the lens through which human security and health are focused—as well as the principles, goals, and approaches embodied by these concepts.

Ultimately, the **dual, multifaceted, and participatory approaches** embodied in health and human security approaches are essential elements for building people’s long-term resilience to threats and for securing their ability to live with freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity. However, human security is still not widely understood around the world, and a better understanding of applied human security approaches is called for. Given this fact, with this document the PAHO Secretariat hopes to contribute to the advancement of these concepts, thus setting the stage to develop methodological tools and instruments for their implementation. Over the coming years, developing lines of action such as those described above can generate information for the formulation of agendas and strategies for health and human security within the Region.