

28 **Operationalising Human Security in an Urban Setting: The Experience of Caracas**

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Abstract

Research into the human security conditions that characterise the urban context of Caracas challenges common perceptions among policymakers and the general public about the main threats to the city's population. A safe and secure city is often considered to be one where the primary goal is not safety, but stability. While public authorities are unable to assure even a minimum level of public security for all inhabitants, particularly in cities divided into precarious and wealthy quarters, they reassure the population of the existence of easily identifiable threats and villains. These villains are blamed for all troubles, dangers, and threats affecting urban life. Analysing threats from a human security perspective, however, unearths other 'villains' responsible for urban insecurity: sometimes, unexpectedly, former accusers turn out to be among the main perpetrators as they do not live up to their responsibility vis-à-vis the population. This approach is not only a pragmatic response to the challenge of providing security as a shared public and private responsibility, but also a moral and philosophical evolution that is driven by, and envisions, the pursuit of positive and sustainable peace in a fair and safe society. Issues such as social inequality, hunger, lack of education or accommodation, road accidents, deficiencies in virtually all areas of public service including public transport, health care, waste removal, and protection from recurring natural disasters threaten society just as much as violence and crime – or even to a far greater extent. This insight fundamentally changes our understanding of what security – and security provision – can and should mean in a modern society.

Keywords: Security; human security; urban security; urban studies; development; human development; Caracas; conflict analysis.

28.1 Introduction

The concept of human security focuses on the needs of individuals and communities. They are the primary objects of security – not the state or the government and its institutions. The latter exist in order to serve the population’s needs and to protect people from external and internal threats to their existence and well-being. If the state assures human security, then political, social, and economic development and stability can be significantly enhanced. At the same time, sustained progress on political, social, and economic development and stability increases opportunities for the provision of human security.

A serious focus on the provision of human security generates considerable potential for the improvement of livelihood conditions, particularly for populations living in precarious conditions. In order to tap this potential, the concept needs to be operationalised and applied meaningfully in the governance of states and society. Within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, a project entitled “Operationalising Human Security: Analysis, Monitoring, and Mitigation of Existential Threats by and for Local Communities” (OPHUSEC) set out to explore how the innovations offered by the human security approach can be helpful in achieving this goal.⁵

The project explored the urban dimension of the analysis and provision of human security in the context of Caracas. It furthermore examined, as full country case studies, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, and Nepal – the latter three primarily as exploratory desk studies. The findings of our research into the human security conditions prevalent in Caracas – the main focus of this article – challenge the common perceptions of policymakers and the general public regarding the key threats experienced by this city’s inhabitants.

This article offers a snapshot of the project findings generated so far with respect to human security conditions in Caracas and the project methodology’s utility in examining human security in an urban context. A brief project review and discussion of the concept of human security is followed by the lessons learned so far from the application of the project’s methodology, as well as preliminary project findings on threat analysis in Caracas and their significance for applying the human security concept in urban contexts. The article concludes with comments on current and future research priorities.

28.2 The project and its conceptual approach

28.2.1 Methodology

In a nutshell, OPHUSEC focuses on the scientific conceptualisation and practical implementation of the concept of human security – and thus individual and population-centred security – in order to define, detect, and mitigate vulnerability to local threats. In the long run, taking this approach is expected to facilitate the development and stabilisation of sustainable livelihood strategies.

The 2003 report of the Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now*, equates human security with the protection of “[...] the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment” (Commission on Human Security 2003, p 4). The Commission further argues that

[h]uman security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military, and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood, and dignity. (ibid., p 4)

As the Commission further elaborates, “[w]hat people consider to be ‘vital’ – what they consider to be ‘of the essence of life’ and ‘crucially important’ – varies across individuals and societies” (ibid., p 4). OPHUSEC proposes and tests mechanisms through which local communities can undertake efforts to define what should be – in *their* context, experience, and reality – identified as ‘the vital core’ of human life, what qualifies as ‘critical and pervasive threats’, and how processes and structures can be strengthened and/or built within the community and governing institutions to permit effective and sustained mitigation of these threats.

The project results are expected to offer useful suggestions about how to strengthen the protection of affected populations’ livelihoods and bring community and civil-society actors as well as official institutions at local, national, and international levels closer together in understanding and responding to salient human security threats. In addition to external and

local research, the project emphasises sustained multi-stakeholder participation in identifying, monitoring, and alleviating threats to human security. OPHUSEC covers case studies in three of the NCCR North-South's partnership regions: the Caribbean and Central America (Caracas), Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan), and the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia). In addition, brief case studies are being conducted in South Asia (Nepal) and Southeast Asia (Laos).

The case studies in Caracas and Ethiopia both follow the same methodology. In a first step, a local research team conducted context-relevant research into the causes and effects of the population's vulnerability and human insecurity (human in/security mapping). The team also explored past and existing mitigation measures applied at state and non-state levels to address the threats affecting the populations' ability to be safe from life-threatening dangers. The team then assembled a wider group of representatives of major stakeholders within the society and the state. This wider circle of 15–20 participants included representatives of the academic and research community, of nongovernmental and intergovernmental organisations working on security and development, of community organisations (in the case of Caracas, organisations from the barrios), and of government agencies (such as the police or the mayor's office). These representatives repeated the human in/security mapping in a three-day participatory multi-stakeholder workshop. The research team then integrated its own findings with those from the multi-stakeholder consultation. Based on the consolidated results, the team identified key threats – existential threats – based on criteria that combined the severity of the threat, the potential for feasible mitigation options, and the implicit and explicit impacts of mitigation on the reduction of other threats not directly included in the selected key threats.

In a second step, a *human insecurity cluster* was identified in consultation and negotiation with the multi-stakeholder group. These jointly agreed core threats were then further analysed; response measures were developed, to be taken by local, national, and international actors to reduce threats and strengthen the coping capacities of the affected populations. Suggested responses were analysed for their feasibility and their likeliness to have a positive impact on the recurrence and severity of core threats experienced by the population. Moreover, this step also included analyses of the actors most able and likely to contribute to mitigation measures, as well as the development of indicators for assessing variations in threat levels and the performance and impact of response measures. In a third step, finally, the research team and the stakeholders developed strategies to transfer the knowledge

generated in the previous step to those actors responsible for, and capable of, local, national, and international policy and programme implementation.

The described project activities pursue three aims. First, they are designed to contribute to academic debates on human and livelihood security through publications and presentations. Second, they attempt to operationalise the concept of human security as a tool for understanding and responding to key threats to the survival and livelihoods of populations by employing context-driven analyses and policy responses. And third, they are intended to trigger the development of improved human security policies and programmes by governmental and nongovernmental actors.

28.2.2 Human security and the urban context

What is unique about human security? The human security debate has been characterised by ongoing quarrels about the definition and meaning of the very term “human security” (Burgess and Owen 2004). Among a bewildering array of definitions (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007, pp 39–71), the one provided by the Commission on Human Security and cited above comes closest to the way the concept of human security is applied in this project. The concept offers some innovations, such as an explicit focus on the individual and the population as the ‘referent objects’ of security, building on many trademarks of the new security debate of the 1990s. While this debate focused on widening and deepening our understanding of ‘security’, the concept of human security constitutes a specific attempt within this debate to shape the way people and their governments think about the roles and responsibilities of the individual, society, the state, and international actors in preventing both structural and direct violence experienced at the level of the population (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007; Schnabel 2008).

The concept reflects a new way of thinking about politics (and policies!), focusing on the population as the nation’s sovereign, with the state as the servant of people’s security and development needs. More comprehensive definitions of human security share this vision and position human security within wider debates about justice and legitimacy, structural violence, and positive peace (Ogata and Cels 2003). On the other hand, narrower definitions of human security, which concentrate primarily on the impact of direct violence on individuals, focus more heavily on issues of public order and political stability (Human Security Centre 2005).

As tends to be the case with concepts that are employed simultaneously in social science research and actual public policy, the concept of human security is rarely used for critical examination; mostly, it is used as a normative means of, and justification for, the political, social, or economic transformation of reality. It calls on the moral, ethical, and legal foundations of a state's responsibility to protect the interests of the population. On this basis, it has so far received greater recognition as a political agenda than as an analytical or programmatic concept. This is problematic and unsatisfactory for those concerned with political and social change, because it does not allow for a priori consideration of the urban – or any other – context as a specific environment in which it is necessary to understand the particular nature of insecurity and security. Yet, insecurity is usually the consequence of a state of human relations: power relations, social relationships, and inequality specifically expressed in a specific context – in the case of Caracas in the context of a city (Sánchez and Pedrazzini 1993; García Sánchez 2002). Thus, human security in Caracas depends on the dynamic state of these relations as they, and their transformation, are conditioned by the urban context.

The usefulness of the concept of human security for scientific analysis of the urban context depends heavily on the methodology used in the analysis. Our approach of working together with those directly affected by the human security condition of their surroundings aims to generate greater value in terms of analytical and policy relevance.

28.3 Lessons of analysis and application

So far the project results have generated some initial lessons about the usefulness of conducting threat and response analyses through a human security lens. One of our hopes was to understand whether unprejudiced, context-driven threat analyses point to different, perhaps more relevant threats than traditional risk and conflict analyses undertaken by very specific actors with their particular interests, priorities, and capacities. Our findings suggest that this is indeed the case: population-centred threat analyses were conducted without a prior disciplinary, geographic, or actor-specific focus, preference, or specialisation; and indeed, they point to more relevant, appropriate, and realistic reflections of threat conditions, profiles, and scenarios.

For example, our analyses included, but were not restricted to, the core problems and threats that contribute to the escalation and outbreak of violent

conflict – which tend to be the main focus of political conflict analysis. Violent conflict frequently materialises as a symptom of underlying threats that first need to be addressed in their own right, given the magnitude of damage they cause to people’s livelihoods and survival. The record on investments in political conflict prevention has tended to be poor; waiting until a threat becomes ‘securitised’ – in other words, until it becomes an important conflict ‘ingredient’ – will rarely help to resolve violent conflict. Threats do not necessarily have to cause or trigger violent conflict in order to be detrimental to people’s survival and well-being. While street or gang violence, for instance, is a real threat and has a destabilising effect on urban security perceptions (Pedrazzini 2005), many more urban dwellers suffer from other threats, such as inadequate public service provision or traffic accidents, which are equally lethal and detrimental to those directly affected. Nevertheless, such threats are often not given the necessary attention. Insights from research conducted so far suggest that shifts in the policies of governments, nongovernmental organisations, and international institutions are required to address these problems, which, although not necessarily highly visible, are most pressing and relevant.

This does not, however, mean that for pragmatic reasons only the most serious threats are addressed at the expense of all others. Far from it: According to a main hypothesis of the OPHUSEC project, close linkages through similar or the same root causes among seemingly diverse threats can trigger positive spin-offs for a wide range of related threats when the root cause of one specific threat is addressed. Is it, therefore, possible to identify a limited number of core human security threats that share root causes with other threats? This would allow strategically and politically adept decision-makers to address politically delicate threats indirectly by alleviating other, less sensitive threats. So far, our results confirm this expectation. The multiplier effect resulting from the alleviation of shared causes of threats allows human security providers to approach the mitigation of politically or socio-culturally sensitive threats by addressing threats that are less ‘touchy’, or for which political and financial momentum as well as public support can be more readily secured. Such thinking takes into account the often highly political nature of threat identification, politicisation, and mitigation, while respecting the fact that, for practical purposes, human security providers can address only a limited number of threats directly and in a meaningful and effective manner.

Here we return to our project's methodology – and its focus on context-driven threat and response analyses. As our results show, the usefulness of the human security concept is greater when we base our analyses on the visions of threats expressed by urban actors themselves, although – or perhaps because – these visions are based to a large degree on perception. Urban dwellers feel the real and comparative significance of threats and therefore also the impact of these threats on the city as a 'real' and very specific environment (Figure 1). In this way, the various urban elements of security and insecurity can be identified, defining 'urban human security' as it is desired and required in the first instance by the inhabitants rather than local and national government agencies and international actors. As a result, security is not simply defined by classical characteristics of urban security, focusing primarily on direct, criminal violence as a threat, nor is the main task in security provision to 'free' the city from crime by locking it up in fear and creating further insecurity.

28.4 Exploring the usefulness of the human security concept in the urban context of Caracas

The human security threat assessments conducted by both the research team and the local multi-stakeholder group in Caracas identified the following main threats: precarious labour and living conditions; delinquency and crime; problems of mobility, accessibility, and traffic accidents; and poor access to food supplies (Antillano et al 2009). Three further issues were identified at the threshold of being causes of threats and being actual threats. These included urban lifestyles, deterioration of medical assistance services, and exposure to solid waste. The first of these refers to a broad combination of factors driven by social and cultural peculiarities associated with life in a large city. It thus reflects urban contexts elsewhere, both in and outside the region. The second and third threats largely refer to the inability of the Municipality of Caracas to provide the level of public services necessary to assure a safe and sustainable life for all inhabitants. As the research team points out, numerous other threats are closely linked to the core threats identified. For instance, improving labour and living conditions would offer many poor and threatened families in Caracas new livelihood options. Positive spin-off effects can be expected not only on other core threats such as delinquency and crime, but also on threats that are not considered core threats according to the assessment, such as forced evictions from the city or widespread health problems among the elderly, women, and children.



Fig. 1
People playing
bingo in a corner
of the barrio Santa
Cruz of Caricua,
South Caracas:
How do they
perceive security
and insecurity in
their city? (Photo
by Nicolas Savary)

The concept of human security proved to be extremely helpful in reconceptualising the prevailing and dominant perception and understanding of what makes for a safe – and of course an unsafe – city in Caracas. A ‘safe city’, for political scientists, criminologists, and sociologists, is one where, in order to attain an acceptable quality of life, security is assured by means of prevention and suppression of direct violence by the main actors of a traditionally defined security sector: the military and the police (Pedrazzini 2005). From this perspective, security is achieved when crime, violence, and corruption are fought and significantly reduced through deterrence and counter-violence. However, such thinking in the urban context has also led to the phenomenon that political scientists call ‘security dilemma’ – the spiral of violence, counter-violence, and reciprocal violence. State-driven use of force to oppress violence results in more societal violence, a sense of state oppression, and, most importantly, overall neglect of many other sources of (structural) violence and threats to the population’s basic existence and well-being.

According to this type of thinking, the security of urban territories, streets, places, parks, and malls, where economic – and social – (business) interactions are conducted within a context of public order facilitated by the presence of police officers, is provided through strict application of a very traditional concept of security. Such a vision of security is based on panicky fears of dormant instability (which in itself is a manifestation of other, more significant but neglected threats that are often overlooked in traditional security thinking) and regards the city as an urban battlefield, instead of a ‘habitat’ (Pedrazzini and Boisteau 2006). As a consequence, a safe and secure city is considered to be a city where the primary goal is not safety but stability. The same can be said about traditional and ‘national’ security thinking vis-à-vis human security approaches if applied at the national level. As public authorities are unable to assure even a minimum level of public security for all inhabitants, particularly in cities divided into precarious and wealthy territories (Figure 2), authorities reassure inhabitants of the existence of easily identifiable threats and easily identifiable villains – the *malandros* – who are blamed for all of the troubles, dangers, and threats affecting urban life (Cariola and Lacabana 2004).

Analysing threats from a human security perspective might reveal other ‘villains’ or ‘criminals’ responsible for urban insecurity: as a result, previous accusers may suddenly turn out to be among the main perpetrators and, if willing to live up to their responsibility vis-à-vis the population, can be given a chance to identify and address this situation by returning to their role as caretakers of the population. For responsible human security providers, understanding their own inadequacies and responsibilities is an important first step towards effective and lasting improvement.

This approach is not only a pragmatic response to urban insecurity and the challenge of providing security as a shared public and private responsibility, but also a moral and philosophical evolution, as it is driven by, and envisions, the pursuit of positive and sustainable peace in a fair and safe society. Threats such as social inequality, hunger, lack of education or accommodation, road accidents, as well as deficiencies in virtually all areas of public service provision including transport, health care, waste removal, and protection from recurring natural disasters, affect society equally or to a greater extent than violence and crime. Such an approach based on the concept of human security thus fundamentally changes our understanding of what security – and security provision – could and should be in a modern society, and, more specifically, what an inclusive and safe city should look and feel like.

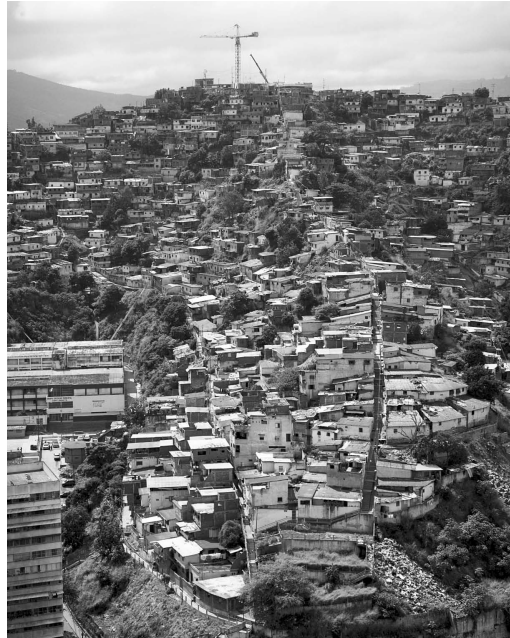


Fig. 2
The barrios and inner city of San Agustín del Sur, Caracas, where people live in precarious conditions and public security is insufficient. (Photo by Nicolas Savary)

If these ‘new’ threats are accepted for what they are – that is, the main reasons for urban insecurity – security providers will be able to consider and confront all threats affecting the city, rather than only a ‘short list’ of threats preselected by authorities with certain political and ideological convictions, under a certain political system, based on traditional conceptions of safety and security and the existence of equally traditional and readily available recipes for ‘hard’ security provision.

As with every case study, the experience from Caracas may be significant but not representative. Nevertheless, the analyses of threats and mitigation strategies have so far identified challenges and solutions that promise to be valid not only for Caracas and its particular historic, political, economic, and social characteristics, but also for urban contexts in general. Numerous lessons learned in Caracas can be applied to other urban contexts as well. This relates both to the usefulness of the OPHUSEC methodology and the type of threats and mitigation strategies relevant to a particular city. Of course, this also means that lessons from other urban analyses would likely prove useful in Caracas – particularly experiences with the method for selecting and applying specific mitigation strategies in response to specific threat dynamics.

28.5 Conclusion: The way forward

Developing a proper understanding of the key threats that plague the urban population of Caracas is certainly invaluable. It is equally invaluable to determine which mitigation measures work, which do not work, which need to be initiated afresh, and by whom. Yet the most revealing threat and mitigation analyses and the most astute recommendations are of little value if no pathways are found to transfer this newly acquired knowledge to those actors who are in a position to implement the recommendations. How can relevant actors (identified as the best placed, most responsive and potentially effective human security providers) be ‘enticed’ to embrace these recommendations and find it in their own interest to follow up on them?

Continuing research in Caracas has to focus on the identification of concrete, practical recommendations on how to mitigate key threats to the urban population of Caracas, as well as opportunities for – and obstacles to – transferring this knowledge to relevant actors among the city’s government authorities and community organisations. Joint input and analysis by representatives of various stakeholder groups and the expertise of the local research team will again be required to identify the most promising and feasible mitigation measures and to determine the right place, time, and approach to ‘reach’ the most significant human security providers. Just as threat analysis is a transdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder exercise, so is the definition of mitigation measures and the identification of entry points for the transfer of knowledge and advice (Schnabel and Krummenacher 2009).

In the concluding stage of OPHUSEC, the project is engaged in fine-tuning its methodology and developing practitioner guidelines and a tool-kit to facilitate easy replication in other urban and non-urban contexts. The objective is to accomplish the project’s transformation from a time-intensive and – in the eyes of practitioners who are eager to achieve rapid results – drawn-out research project into a practical tool that can be meaningfully applied in different situations. Moreover, this tool needs to be flexible enough to accommodate different levels of financial and human resources and capacities available for conducting assessments. In addition, recommendations will be made to further strengthen the applicability of this approach by using the initial OPHUSEC analysis as a baseline report on which subsequent follow-up analyses could be conducted. These follow-up analyses would focus on the roles of specific groups of mitigation actors (such as the security sector, the development community, or humanitarian actors), individual actors

(such as the government, local civil society organisations, a specific regional organisation, or the United Nations) and their individual or joint contributions to the mitigation of particular threats identified by the OPHUSEC baseline report.

Local communities, as well as state and non-state human security providers who consider the approach taken in this project to be innovative and useful, will be invited to make use of this people-centred and context-driven threat identification and mitigation mechanism in their own efforts to identify and improve their population's human security conditions. The methodology developed in this project is intended as a valuable and complementary addition to existing instruments used by political, humanitarian, and development actors in assessing and mitigating vulnerability, risk, and insecurity.

Endnotes

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⁵ OPHUSEC was a so-called “Transversal Package Project” (TPP). TPPs were a Phase 2 component of the NCCR North-South that helped to cross disciplinary boundaries, with a view to achieving better integration of complex issues within the framework of the overall theme of sustainable development and syndrome mitigation. TPPs were interdisciplinary projects entrusted to research teams under the leadership of promising post-doctoral researchers from the North and the South.

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