The idea that our understanding and articulation of security needed to be broadened to focus on individuals and communities and that we should view democratisation, development and security as interlinked had been on the margins of the security discourse until the release of the United Nations Development Programme Report of 1994. This report gave coherent and systematic expression to these beliefs, named the concept ‘human security’, and thus posited it in the lexicon of security studies. The concept gained widespread international attention, challenging the ontological and epistemological assumptions that had become the mainstay of security studies and praxis. “Freedom from want’, ‘Freedom from fear’ and ‘Empowerment’ were constitutive of the new human security approach.

* Cheryl Hendricks is the head of the Southern African Human Security Programme at the Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria, South Africa.
Africa was central to the development of this new perspective: the predominance of civil wars widely attributed to the lack of good governance and the series of non-traditional threats such as HIV/AIDS, food shortages, desertification and other environmental challenges provided the context that necessitated an analytical shift in the security discourse, whilst the African intelligentsia – through for example, the Conference on Security, Stability, Development and Co-operation in Africa (CSSDCA) and the contributions of people like South Africa’s previous speaker of parliament, Frene Ginwala, to the UN Commission on Human Security – were key in conceptualising the nature and referents of security. The concept found its way into the discussions, declarations and protocols of the African Union and into the policy frameworks, vision and mission statements of key security establishments and research institutions, including the Institute for Security Studies.

But the initial enthusiasm that embraced the shift to human security has waned. Post–9/11 traditional security concerns – in this case counter-terrorism – regained centre stage. A plethora of arguments critiquing the concept of human security as ill-defined and lacking operationalisation, and emphasising the central role of the state in the provision of security, also emerged. Human security advocates in turn began to divide themselves into those who purportedly advocated a broad definition and a narrow definition of human security, that is, a focus on violence/violent conflicts and a predominant focus on state security whilst admitting that security, democracy and development are interrelated. This narrow definition is evident in the *Human Security Report 2005: war and peace in the 21st century*. The report contends that ‘a concept that lumps together threats as diverse as genocide and affronts to personal dignity may be useful for advocacy, but has limited utility for policy analysis’ (p viii). Within the African context, too, human security remained a vague concept, proliferating in policy documents but with little resonance in the daily operations of the security apparatus.

Has the human security paradigm run its course and can therefore be jettisoned to the heap of other laudable developmental concepts that appear and disappear, in predictable fashion, every decade? Is it a paradigm that civil society, as the greatest beneficiary of its tenets, needs to continue to assert? Can we effectively respond to the challenges posed by its detractors? What constitutes human security in the African context and what do we need to do to achieve it?

These concerns run through the pages of this volume. There is no agreement between authors on the subject, but through their discussion, the rationale for a human security perspective, or challenges to the perspective in the African context, can be discerned.

Katja Svensson, drawing on feminist insights, questions the embeddedness of power relations in the security perspectives and cautions against the dismissal of human security of the basis of a lack of ‘analytical neatness.’ Ian Spears refocuses us on the aberration
of the post-colonial African state – that is, that it only has de jure validity and is often incapable of meeting its basic functions. He views the state as constitutive of the ongoing threats but as the only institution capable of creating human security on the continent. Thomas Tieku explores the ways in which human security has been introduced into the African Union and its current status, while Peter Uvin discerns, through a series of interviews with young Burundians, what their understanding of security is.

The concerns that propelled the development of a human security perspective, growing individual and community insecurity caused by poverty, crime, gender-based violence, environmental challenges, and human rights abuses remain and are increasing. Whether we call our response to these concerns ‘human security’, or any other appellation, should not be our primary occupation; that we address them, must be!

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