Health and Human Security

Why human security?
Today's threats are becoming more and more complex, interrelated, and transnational. Traditional national security approaches alone—while still critically important—cannot counteract them or mitigate their impact on the lives, wellbeing, and dignity of individuals and communities. We need a new paradigm that gets at the root causes of critical and pervasive challenges and aims to build resilience at the individual and community level to existing and potential threats. Human security attempts to do this by focusing simultaneously on three universal freedoms: freedom from fear, freedom from want, and freedom to live in dignity. It expands the notion of security by linking top-down protection with bottom-up empowerment and acknowledges that both approaches are equally important to reducing vulnerability on a daily basis. While the concept of human security is universal, its application is locally driven and context specific, reflecting the fact that conditions and causes of insecurity vary significantly across countries and across communities within individual countries.

Health and human security
Three of the eight Millennium Development Goals deal exclusively with health, reflecting the central importance of health to a person's ability to survive and to his or her livelihood, wellbeing, and sense of dignity. As such, health is not a goal in and of itself but a critical resource for achieving the three freedoms that are central to human security.

While health is a very personal condition, an individual's health often has broader impacts, affecting surrounding communities and, increasingly, even those elsewhere around the globe. At the same time, health has an impact on and is impacted by many other human security challenges, such as poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and violence. Recent pandemics, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the H5N1 and H1NI strains of influenza offer vivid examples of the ways in which a health challenge can grow to have global implications on economies and societies around the world, well beyond the health field. They also highlight the fact that communities that face other human security challenges, such as pervasive poverty or violent conflict, are often less equipped to deal with pandemics and their impacts on the lives of their people. In addition, efforts to fight pandemics highlight the importance of linking protection and empowerment: government services are needed to ensure that people have accurate information and access to preventive and treatment services, but diseases will continue to spread unless people take the initiative to protect themselves and those around them from infection and to seek treatment when it is needed.

Human security and resilience
Human security is by definition a comprehensive framework, and therefore a human security approach needs to address interrelated threats—not exclusively health—if it is going to have a real, lasting impact on people's lives, wellbeing, and dignity. But, considering the critical role that health plays in reducing individuals' and communities' vulnerability to other threats, it should be a central pillar in efforts to build resilience to the multiple threats faced on a daily basis. At the same time, the core elements of human security—community-driven approaches, emphasis on interrelated threats, and the link between protection and empowerment—are also at the heart of efforts that have proven successful in improving the health of individuals and communities around the world.