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## The Missing Link in Human Security Research: Dialogue and Insecurity in Kosovo

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### **Abstract**

The concept of human security continues to defy definitional clarity at the same time as it is being embraced by policy-makers. This article proposes a practice-grounded approach, which focuses on investigative method as a way of linking conceptual understanding of human security to the research process. Probing the actorness of individuals in volatile contexts, a study of insecurity in Kosovo shows how dialogue can be applied as a research tool to access

and assess human security in the field. Dialogue allows the recognition of the power of the researched in the construction of knowledge of security, reflecting the conceptual shift represented by human security from states to communities and individuals. In the Kosovo study, dialogic research captured individual agency in the face of pervasive insecurity, revealing its contradictory effects. It led to the identification of a *multidirectional security marker* as a means to understand experiences of insecurity in relation to strategies to combat it. Three such *markers*: self-reliance, informality and community solidarity, emerged and are analysed in the case of Kosovo. Simultaneously denoting restrictions on people's security and possibilities for overcoming those very same limitations, the *markers* express the agential dimension of human security and show how agency and security interact.

**Key words: human security, dialogue, method, multidirectional security marker, Kosovo**

## **Introduction**

Definitional arguments continue to dominate, even dog, debates about human security. This is despite the fact that human security ideas have become increasingly mainstreamed by practitioners in conflict and post-conflict settings. Also, versions have been appropriated by actors traditionally more concerned with geopolitics and state security (Owen, 2008; Chandler, 2008a,b; Muggah & Krause, 2006; Makarychev, 2012). Examples as diverse as US counterinsurgency doctrine, the use of 'population security' in Afghanistan, the European Union's security policies, and peace-building discourses, suggest there is a shift towards implementing human-centred forms of security. While there may indeed be something

problematic about attaching a specific label of human security to such policy initiatives (Martin & Owen, 2010), it has neither stopped the emergence of human security approaches by any other name or their use 'without hesitation by the breadth of security and development actors' (Christie, 2013). The result is a paradox. On the one hand, there is conceptual confusion and contestation that continue to surround human security. On the other, policy practices embrace the concept with increasing confidence and conviction. The proliferation of so-called human security approaches arguably demands a continuation of the definition debate. In this article, we propose a practice-grounded approach. It aims to understand human security through an exploration of method. Investigating insecurity on the ground *via* the application of 'bespoke' research tools allows us to better identify what human security is and where to find it, and enrich our understanding, based on differentiating the concept from traditional types of security. In other words, our position is one of 'finding meaning in method'.

We address the definitional impasse and fuzziness of meaning attached to the concept through a focus on the agential qualities of human security. The conceptual debate traditionally begins with an interrogation of security as for *someone – whom?* – rather than questions such as 'security of what?' or 'by what means?' (Gasper, 2013). It answers by conferring a privileged position on the individual, or groups of individuals within security discourse, rather than to the state or institutions such as sovereignty. However, this proves to be only a jumping off point as human security debates have become subsumed with other questions about what it is to be human, how being human modifies notions of security, how expansive the idea of risk in relation to individuals should be, whether certain threats even constitute security (King & Murray, 2001; MacFarlane & Khong, 2006), how much security individuals are entitled to (Krause, 2004), and whether, where and how security should be

delimited? (Owen, 2004). As the puzzle fragments progressively, what is left, as Gasper (2013) notes, is a complex and contested semantic field where not only subjectivity, but culture, community and solidarity all claim our attention in attempting to attach meaning to the term human security.

The point of entry for both scholarly and practitioner orientated discussions of meaning and definition is not agency, but rather vulnerability. Considering human security in terms of managing threats to individuals and which kinds of threats deserve attention has led down a path of dualism between broad and narrow conceptions and the operational difficulties of both (Paris, 2001; Werthes & Debiel, 2006; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007; Glasius, 2008). This focus has the effect of immediately de-activating individuals who are rendered more passive and objectified in the face of attacks on their personal safety and/or well-being, on the one hand, or by the techniques of control designed and deployed by others to rescue them, on the other hand. In contrast, we are interested in the actorness of individuals in dangerous and difficult environments, in terms of how they confront dilemmas of survival, and develop a role in articulating a picture of (in)security which provokes others to act to assist them. By putting 'the individual at the centre of debate, analysis and policy' (Thakur, 2004: 347–348; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007: 13), human security can be said to articulate an agential view of security. Indeed, for some, empowerment and emancipation constitute the whole point of offering a radical reworking of traditional security approaches, although the extent to which agency is incorporated into human security is frequently not spelled out. It is more evident in the case of marginalized minority groups who are given voice and power in human security discourse (Suhrke, 1999, 271-272; Hudson, 2005).

Coming from the development field, Amartya Sen and Sabina Alkire (2005) are more

deliberate in establishing agency as an additional pre-requisite of human security. This concern is reflected in the protection plus empowerment formula adopted by the *Commission on Human Security* (CHS 2003). Agency also finds expression in concerns about the sustainability of security practices premised on the need for local people to participate in reconstruction or resilience activities (Khagram et al., 2003: 290; Barnett & Adger, 2007). Yet, here again the emphasis is on a normative proposition of how human security can or should reshape our views of the security problematic, leaving unexplored a relative dearth of empirically grounded illustrations of how agency and security interact in practice. For some scholars, agency also forms part of the contestation of human security, contributing to the critique that it is a conservative framework which pathologizes local populations to render them susceptible to external intervention and a perpetuation of their limited or non-agency (McCormack, 2008: 114).

In this article we develop and illustrate the use dialogue as a research tool that allows us to pursue the 'feedback loop' that links conceptual understanding of human security to the research process. Dialogue allows the recognition of the agential power of the researched in the construction of knowledge of human security, and provides insights into the complexity of lived experiences of insecurity. Dialogic approach leads us to identify self-reliance, informality and community solidarity as three *multidirectional security markers* in Kosovo. The *markers* are a means to identify and explore contradictory effects of agency in relation to security, because they simultaneously denote both opportunities and constraints on people's ability to change their circumstances.

The article is structured as follows. We first make the case for dialogue as a research tool to further the understanding of human security. This is in line with our argument that a parallel

shift in research methods consistent with a conceptual shift in human security towards individuals and communities is necessary. We proceed to illustrate this argument by applying dialogue as a way of investigating human security in Kosovo. A description of the research process is accompanied by a presentation of the key findings. A discussion of *multidirectional security markers* as a means for capturing complex enactments and effects of agency in response to multiple and interconnected sources of insecurity is followed by the presentation of empirical data from the field. We conclude by reflecting on the proposition to find ‘meaning from method’, while highlighting the importance of knowledge production in human security studies.

### **Human Security: Definitional Impasse and Dialogic Research**

We contend that part of the reason for the gap in an empirically driven knowledge about human security stems from a disconnect between the rethinking of security and the way it is researched. The definitional impasse and conceptual fuzziness of human security may be a product of not just an excess of normative reasoning, but also the failure to apply suitable investigative tools. Critical thinking about security has relied largely on methods of knowledge production, which are rooted in established conventions about the nature of security and its goals, while purporting to offer new analytical perspectives. The change of referent object from the state to people is the most visible sign of a transformation of analytical and operational parameters (Newman, 2001: 239; Bilgin, 2003: 208-209). However, human security has paid scant attention to the methodological implications of shifting security away from the nation-state towards the local, individual and personal. Distance is assumed and accepted between the researcher/outsider and the insider who is individual/local. The power relationship between the targets/victims of security and the

externals analysing insecurity also remains weighted in favour of the latter. This gap between concept and research practice has been further highlighted by recent scholarship that begins to probe the nature of knowledge and knowledge production within the new discourses of security (Hampson, 2008: 241-242). Therefore, an exploration of how people and groups are treated in researching human security as well as in policy implementation ought to be consistent with the conceptual shift of security away from the nation-state, territory, borders and macro-politics and into individual life worlds. As Stuvøy points out, human security ought to be a matter of research practice (2010: 280).

Critical security studies have begun to throw a rich vein of insights that suggest productive avenues for human security research to pursue. In particular, by taking security as socially situated and discursively defined these approaches begin to break down the universalism embedded in global security. Accordingly, they start to rethink it as a site of 'shifting political imaginaries and practices' in which 'complex processes of accommodation, rejection and reformulation' and the salience of uncertainty form part of the problematic to be studied (Bubandt, 2005: 276-277; See Stern and Öjendal, 2011: 108). Similarly, Stuvøy (2010) integrates subjective interpretation in the research methodology in order to validate subjects' views and perceptions in the production of security. Here researchers are concerned about creating bottom-up, actor-orientated and vernacular forms, which can account for not only the messiness of individual perspectives but also the fact that the (in)secure individual is part of a fluid context of power relations in which personal security is part of a dynamic of governance, regulation and biopolitics (Hudson, 2005; See Grayson, 2008: 395).

Notwithstanding these insights, the unsettled and politicized nature of agency is still a nettle waiting to be grasped in elaborating human security's claim to offer a new paradigm of

security, and in fostering new approaches to knowledge. The nature of individual agency in fragile contexts is far from straightforward. It fluctuates according to context and specifically how vulnerability is defined by people themselves as well as a result of processes of securitization by others (Grayson, 2008; Buzan et al., 1998). This complexity needs to be part both of our investigation and understanding of security. Hence, the challenge is how to position individuals in the research process to understand their experiences of security and their responses to it.

This article identifies dialogue as a research method that allows the researcher to go beyond thinking of individuals only in terms of a referent of security, i.e. as ‘those on whose behalf action is being taken’ (McCormack, 2008: 124). A dialogic conversation about human security is premised on collaborative production of knowledge in the research process, recognizing *a priori* the research subject’s agency in the construction of specific knowledge of security. It takes on board concerns with power and positionality in the process of knowledge creation by muting the distinction between the researched and researcher, while giving agency to the researched to shape the process of knowledge creation conceived as co-construction.

A dialogic method as a qualitative inquiry draws on philosophical underpinnings of dialogue associating it with the notions of mutuality and egalitarianism (Kvale, 2006: 481; Linell, 1998: 9-12). In this respect, it belongs to methods like qualitative interviews, which ushered in the democratization of research practice by recognizing an individual as a source of knowledge. As a process of knowledge-creation, a dialogue between the researcher and the researched ‘honestly reflect[s] the difficulties of interpreting another person’s world’ (O’Reilly, 2009: 16). The understanding of a dialogue as a collaborative effort of knowledge

creation resonates closely with a shift in conceptualizing a qualitative interview. An interview as an asymmetrical encounter and an exercise of extraction of information by a researcher has been revised due to growing sensitivities to issues of agency, subjectivity, authority and reflexivity. Specifically, the recognition of an active role for a research subject in the construction of information has led to appreciation of co-creation of knowledge in an interview setting (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003: 4-12; Tanggaard, 2009: 1510). Such conceptual approximation of the two research tools is expressed in the term: dialogic interview. We use dialogue and dialogic interview interchangeably, connected by the minimization of distinction between the researcher and the researched, and reconfiguration of power between them.<sup>1</sup> Like Rubin and Rubin (2005: 97), we approach the researched as a ‘conversational partner’, which denotes a shift of power away from the researcher.

Dialogue as a research tool for investigating human security addresses issues of power in the research process where the outcome is knowledge creation. However, the emphasis in a dialogic approach is on actively generating collaboration in knowledge production, rather than the naïve dismissal of any power asymmetries in the dialogue. Given that all communication presupposes asymmetries of knowledge and participation, Linell (1998: 14) suggests the perspective of complementarity rather than symmetry to capture what takes place in a dialogue: ‘parties communicate from different positions and yet achieve some degree of shared understanding in and through their interaction.’ Similarly, Wood (2004: xviii) points to interaction in a ‘*process of dialogue*’ (italics in the original) as a critical dynamics that leads to authoring and co-authoring as opposed to disclosure and self-revelation. Consequently, a dialogue allows for reconfiguring power and its location in the

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<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding of a qualitative interview is in contrast to one presupposing power asymmetry that needs to be tackled explicitly through agonistic interview strategies (Kvale, 2006: 486-491).

research process, and conceiving of it in terms of mutual influence that is not located in persons, but between persons (Anderson et al., 2004: 264). This is an alternative reading of power and positionality. It stands in contrast to the notions of ‘studying up’ or ‘studying down’ (Schrijvers, 1991), that reflect power inequalities in the research process, or ‘studying sideways’, as a way of displacing or distributing power between the researcher and researched of the same or similar status (Plesner, 2011; Paulus et al., 2010). By contrast, a dialogue as a practice in researching human security presupposes the equality of the vulnerable and marginalized, providing them with opportunities to realize and exercise that equality through collaboration and reciprocity in knowledge production.

Participation in a dialogue constructed around human security, but with no pre-conceived notion by the outside researcher as to what human security is or ought to be, is aimed at re-appraising individuals' own experience and understanding of security through dialogic exposure to a new concept. The aim is reflexive engagement in the research process that concerns both the researched and the researcher alike. Drawing on the work of Latour (2005) and Lynch (2000), Plesner (2011: 490) makes an argument for ‘giving reflexivity back to actors’, as distinct from the researcher’s reflexivity towards their work. The reflexivity of the researched implies paying attention to how their interpretations change during the interview. Therefore, a dialogue can transform a passive awareness or unspoken experience of insecurity by the researched, resulting in the altered understanding of security through the research process (See Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2009: 312-313).

Like in critical globalization research, a dialogue offers a possibility of legitimizing personal, subjective experiences and understandings of insecurity through ‘co-investigation’ as an enriched knowledge creation process (Johnston & Goodman, 2011: 24; See Barnard & Van

Gerven, 2009: 821). It is defined by a removal of dualisms, such as that between a research object and/or subject (Pouliot, 2007). It also has the potential to incorporate a dynamic element to empirical observation, which emerges from the part of the researched rather than being dictated by the researcher. In line with the conceptual shift away from states to individuals and communities in the human security perspective, this bottom-up methodology 'humanizes' the security research process to reveal both the possibilities and limits of human action, and their unexpected effects, as demonstrated below with a research in Kosovo.

### **Finding Meaning from Method: Human Security in Kosovo**

The 1999 NATO intervention ended the repressive Serb-rule over Kosovo's majority Albanian population. Kosovo became a UN-run protectorate until Kosovo Albanians' unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. The independence was rejected by Serbia that continued to support Kosovo's Serb minority and their so-called parallel structures in Serb-populated areas with the most populous enclave in the north. Beyond a state- and ethno-centric perspective on insecurity in Kosovo lies a complex socio-economic picture of vulnerabilities with high levels of poverty, unemployment, corruption and weak rule of law. These are associated with the recent conflict, both in terms of extensive material destruction, but also in terms of distorting effect of war economy on governance structures. Studies of security issues related to Kosovo have been dominated by debates about humanitarian intervention and global security institutions in light of the external military response to Kosovo's human rights crisis (Williams 2009; Shepherd 2009; Hehir 2008; Booth 2001). Similarly, a mixed record of external state-building in post-conflict Kosovo is a subject of critical peace- and state-building scholarship, highlighting disempowering effects of international administration and normative mismatch between externally-defined agendas and

local needs (Hehir 2010; Ioannides & Collantes-Cellador 2011). The emerging human security-defined investigations have provided complementary insights by bringing in the local perspective as a critical commentary (Sabovic 2010; Beha & Visoka 2010; Kostovicova 2008; Cleland Welch 2006; Nelles 2002). However, their contribution to the understanding of (in)security in Kosovo from the perspective of the people affected has been limited due to their use of selected understanding(s) of human security as a tool for interpretation and assessment, which questioned neither the meaning of competing definitions nor the methods of investigation. Our research attempts to address this gap in the scholarship on Kosovo. Through dialogue we approach the local voice as a resource for the re-interpretation of human security itself.

### *Dialogue in Kosovo Human Security Research*

The empirical research with the goal of understanding human security in Kosovo took place from February to May 2010 in ten locations. It applied dialogue as a research tool on two levels to investigate insecurity. At one level, the dialogue involved local parties in Kosovo: individuals and communities, and local Albanian and Serbian researchers. At the second level the dialogue involved the latter, i.e. Albanian and Serbian researchers, and UK-based researchers. The first stage of research consisted of a three-day collaboration between UK researchers and local volunteers, structured around their familiarization with the concept of human security. The concept was explicated and operationalized using principles defined by the Human Security Study Group (*A Human Security Doctrine for Europe*, 2004),<sup>2</sup> and placed within the broader context of the conceptual academic and policy debate on human security. It was also discussed in generic terms in relation to the political, social and

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<sup>2</sup> The principles include: the primacy of human rights, a legitimate authority, a bottom-up approach, effective multilateralism and an integrated regional approach.

economic environment in Kosovo. The second stage focused on research design and research dialogue techniques, including the questionnaire to be used as a prompt for a dialogic interview on human security. In the process, the original draft questionnaire was adapted through a discussion to better correspond with local political, historical and cultural contexts and sensitivities in Kosovo. The subsequent identification of locations for empirical research was likewise a collaborative undertaking between Kosovan and UK teams.

The second stage consisted of local researchers entering local communities and approaching potential dialogic collaborators and initiating dialogues rather than prompting closed answers. The aim was to explore and transmit what people felt about the security/insecurity of their daily lives, while being introduced to human security as an alternative perspective on security. For example, the headline question, ‘What/who makes you feel insecure?’, intended to capture multiple sources of insecurity experienced at individual and community level. The second headline question, ‘What do you wish you could do but feel unable to do and why?’, was related to security aspirations. It aimed to capture the notion of constraints on human agency. In sum, a discussion that engaged interlocutors in rethinking security in human security terms was an integral part of the dialogue. This approach was instrumental in enabling the reconfiguration of the power relationship between the researcher and the researched, discussed above. The research targets were no longer merely a source of information. By being brought into the dialogue on human security as a participant/collaborator, they were active contributors in constituting an open rather than pre-defined form of knowledge about human security in Kosovo.

The research was conducted in Prishtinë/Priština, Prizren/Prizren, Pejë/Peć, Podujevë/Podujevo, North Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, Shtërpçë/Štrpce,

Gračanica/Gračanica, Istog/Istok and Obiliq/Obilić.<sup>3</sup> The local research teams engaged a total of 100 interlocutors, making every effort to include a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, as well as securing representativeness in terms of age, gender, rural/urban location, employment and resident/Internally Displaced Person (IDP) status.<sup>4</sup> The sample included 65 Albanians, 21 Serbs, 7 Roma, 4 Ashkali, 2 Bosnians, and 1 Gorani. There were 43 females and 57 males, while 62 live in towns and cities, 33 in villages, and 5 in camps. 21 of the sample were IDPs. In terms of the employment status, 47.0% were employed, 31.0% were unemployed, 18% were university students, and 4.0% were pensioners.

Dialogic approach was applied consistently in data collection and data analysis. The data obtained through the field research were initially analysed by local research teams, producing a set of key findings by location.<sup>5</sup> The subsequent stage of data analysis took place in a collaborative dialogic setting over a two-day workshop between local researchers and the UK team. The focus was on finding the meaning of human security in Kosovo, including the understanding of agency and its limits in Kosovo's unique socio-political environment. The session also included a critical reflection on the applied research method. In sum, dialogue was a tool for knowledge construction that also included dialogic interpretation and validation of empirical data (Denzin, 1989: 118-120; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009: 253-256).

### **Multidirectional Human Security Markers in Kosovo: Self-Reliance, Informality and Community Cohesion**

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<sup>3</sup> The Albanian name is followed by the Serbian name.

<sup>4</sup> The last population census conducted in Kosovo was in 1981.

<sup>5</sup> The findings were independently verified by the UK research team whose members are fluent in Albanian and Serbian.

The dialogic route to understanding human security in Kosovo led us to our key finding: *multidimensional security marker* as a means of capturing contradictory and unexpected enactments and effects of agency. The initial analysis of our research findings ‘localized’ the meaning of human security in the Kosovo context. It identified unemployment, lack of strong economic growth and corruption as three principal and inter-connected problems among all ethnic communities in Kosovo. In this sense, the results of the initial analysis were not surprising. They confirmed the findings of survey-based studies of security and threat perceptions in Kosovo (Table 5, Kosovo Mosaic, 2009: 24; Community Safety, 2009: 10-12). The dialogic approach revealed an additional conceptual richness of data/knowledge on human (in)security in Kosovo. We found that the capacity of the vulnerable to exercise power and agency could not be inferred automatically or directly from evidence of insecurity. For example, unemployment was understood by affected communities in Kosovo both as a constraint on agency, but also as a trigger for their empowerment through alternative avenues, such as informality. This led us to conclude that identifying and elaborating manifestations of insecurity had limited analytical traction. Importantly, it would leave untold a complex story of lived insecurity alongside strategies used by individuals to overcome it. Consequently, we propose a *multidirectional security marker* as a heuristic device to assess people’s experiences of insecurity in their daily lives in relation to strategies to combat it. The marker is *multidirectional* because it reflects restrictions on people’s security, while, unexpectedly, also entails possibilities for overcoming those very same limitations. We call them *markers* because they express, rather than measure or rank, as an indicator might (Davis et al., 2011: 5-12), the nature of threats to individual existence, but, at the same time, encompass a specific response to that generalized sense of insecurity. In other words, *multidirectional security markers* provide a conceptual envelope or set of coordinates within

which agency can be located, while appreciating that the effects of such agency can be both empowering and disempowering. In exploring dialogically the ‘worm’s eye view’ of security concerns, as opposed to the ‘bird’s eye view’ offered by surveys (Hakim, 2000: 36), these *markers* reveal ‘hidden’ dynamics of insecurity in real life circumstances. Finally, *multidirectional security markers* point to the inconsistencies and paradoxes, which characterize people’s attempts to lead secure or dignified lives surrounded by uncertainty. In Kosovo, we identify three *multidirectional security markers*: self-reliance, informality and community cohesion.

### *Self-reliance*

The research revealed a remarkable degree of self-reliance among Kosovo’s citizens. Whether they consider themselves as primary providers of physical and economic security, self-reliance represents citizens’ loss of faith in state institutions, both at national and municipal level, but also their ability to generate an effective substitute for inadequate public goods provision. Thus, self-reliance, which is forged out of necessity, is empowering. It testifies to the role of individual agency, enhancing the sense of security primarily understood as human dignity. But, reliance on one’s self, family and a close circle of friends, has also resulted in individuals’ withdrawal from the public sphere in Kosovo. Consequently, the state’s failure to deliver public goods remains largely unchallenged, perpetuating the sense of insecurity.

Since the end of the 1998-1999 conflict in Kosovo, an absence of overt violence, albeit with sporadic flare-ups, as in spring 2004, has contributed to making most people feel physically safe. Mostly, physical fear was not an issue in the dialogues including in the Serb and other

minority communities, as a Roma interlocutor from Obiliq/Obilić summed up: ‘If there is no violence and war I feel more secure.’ Nonetheless, almost all interlocutors tended to think of security primarily in very tangible terms of material security. The lack of jobs and incomes was directly related to their sense of insecurity. ‘We lack the elementary living conditions and when you can’t even provide for your family, how can you feel secure?’, said an interlocutor from Prishtinë/Priština. The main variation was recorded in the Serb communities Gračanica/Gračanica and Shtërpçë/Štrpce where Serbs spoke about restrictions on their freedom of movement as contributing to a sense of insecurity. In these communities the absence of the incidence of violence mattered less than perceptions of physical threats: people’s fears were based on what might happen to them, and on their distrust of the majority community.

A strong theme in dialogues about security providers concerned *who* interlocutors in Kosovo believed was responsible for their security and would make them feel safe. The dialogues revealed a strong sense of self-reliance in that real security was seen as something that only those closest to them – whether immediate family or neighbours – could guarantee. In many cases, the small scale of the territory gave people the sense of knowing the town and the people, and of solidarity and reassurance within neighbourhood structures, which were also a source of empowerment. From them they find financial, and in some cases psychological security. This is an aspect of a closed circle of self-reliance, which marginalizes formal law enforcement agents in favour of those people know or are close to. For example in North Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, nine of the 10 interlocutors replied that only they can protect themselves. In other cases interlocutors mentioned specific family members. ‘[My] [h]usband provides security and safety to our family. I was in a situation when I needed help, on 17 March 2004 [the post-conflict Kosovo-wide Albanian rioting aimed against the Serbs], and

neighbours and my husband helped and protected me,' an interlocutor from Gračanica/Gračanica said. Police were mentioned only rarely, as generally people do not seek recourse from them to improve their sense of safety. According to an interlocutor from Istog/Istok, 'It should [be] the police, but I don't trust them. So I believe in my family.' Women in all communities often named their husbands or parents as the main source of security. However, it is not clear whether this was seen in terms of physical protection alone or again as a feature of the correlation between material well-being and a general sense of security. What emerged was that security is defined by people in an intimate and personal way, rather than institutionalized as a community or a national issue. Informal yet tangible support mechanisms or self-assurance, which came about through being part of a social group, made people feel safer and more self-reliant.

This definition of security provision was also related to and reinforced by a general distrust of international and local security forces, which extends across NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), the Kosovo Police Service (KPS) and the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). Expectations of these institutions was low across all communities. This was sometimes based on individual experiences as illustrated by an interlocutor in Istog/Istok who thought that NATO troops had failed to deal with an outbreak of violence in 2004 adequately or the failure of police to deal effectively and promptly with incidents. This distrust was often expressed as a generalized lack of respect for the competence of official security providers. Interlocutors from South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica commented, 'They only finish legal procedures' or 'I don't trust the police that much to make me feel secure.' Many interlocutors referred to a perceived poor professionalism and training, and suspected the security institutions of corruption and indifference. More broadly, interlocutors spoke of a failure of law and order, and poor administration of justice. This view was shared by interlocutors who themselves worked in

municipal authorities and who were dismissive of the ability of these bodies to deliver order and justice.

Furthermore, dialogues on security protection provided additional insights from an ethnic perspective. While people had minimal trust in and respect for official security forces, there was widespread recognition of the KPS and the KSF as representing Albanians' security interests. In a Serb community such as Gračanica/Gračanica responses were more mixed: some named the authorities of Serbia as their security providers 'because they pay me', although some Serbs also regarded the KPS and KFOR as agents of their security. Research in this locality also revealed a contradictory perception of security. All interlocutors confirmed that they would feel most secure if the Serbian army and police returned to Kosovo 'as before 1999.' At the same time as they highlighted the importance of ethnicity in discussions of security, interlocutors rejected this as a sole criterion for safety provision. All interlocutors expressed their distrust towards the Serbian police officers who joined the Kosovo Police Service. According to one interlocutor from Gračanica/Gračanica, 'As for our protection we have none. Who can protect me? Ever since 'our folks' returned to the KPS [referring to integration of the Serbs in the multiethnic police service], they steal even more.' Consequently, the security dividend of self-reliance in terms of relying on one's own ethnic representatives as security providers was rendered void.

### *Informality*

Informality in the context of research into human security in Kosovo denotes practices of non-compliance, avoidance, evasion or disregard of the formal rules regulating polity, economy and society. At the core of this widespread and socially accepted system are

complex linkages between the large informal economy and entrenched corruption shaped by Kosovo's post-conflict and post-communist transition. On the one hand, recourse to informality, primarily through undermining governance, has been detrimental to the provision of public facilities, and hence it has impaired the security of people and communities in Kosovo. On the other hand, it has been a strategy and a means to resolve everyday life's problems and demands. Thus, the research findings demonstrate the contradictory dynamics of agency. The disregard for formal rules and institutions was unanimously seen as disempowering. But, at the same time, people found dignity through resorting to informal means to alter their insecure situation.

The findings in Kosovo point to profound insecurity and existential instability stemming from limited income generation and employment opportunities given Kosovo's weak economy. This is true for all communities. While the great majority of interlocutors said they are able to provide for their basic needs, Roma and Ashkali communities find it difficult to sustain even a subsistence level of material provision. Less extreme but still precarious is the hand-to-mouth existence of displaced people such as some Serbs in Gračanica/Gračanica and Shtërpcë/Štrpce, especially those housed in refugee accommodation and reliant on meagre social security hand-outs. Taking several different jobs, through informal arrangements, is one of the ways to secure a more adequate standard of living. This strategy is available only to some sections of the urban population, but not to those living in villages. Mirroring self-reliance in security provision, many also resort to their own means to mitigate circumstances linked to poor economic opportunities. For example, food security depends in a large number of cases on people growing their own fruit and vegetables or relying on relatives to supply them.

In Kosovo, remittances are an important mechanism to cope with material insecurity caused by poor economic and social conditions. Dialogues highlighted their paradoxical impact on agency and empowerment. Payments help make ends meet, but dependence on others, through receiving remittances even from close family members, is disempowering and even resented, as illustrated by an elderly interviewee from Prizren/Prizren, ‘I find it very hard to take [my son’s] money because even their economic conditions are not good, but there are cases when I don’t have other solutions and I have to take it’; or, a man from South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica who gets money from his brothers: ‘Most of the time I feel bad about this; I would like to be active and earn my own money but right now it is not possible.’

Economic development is perceived as key to overcoming various forms of economic and social deprivation. On a personal level, having regular and adequate income is considered of crucial importance to improved well-being, as succinctly summed up by an interviewee in Prizren/Prizren: ‘Money is the element that makes human beings feel secure. When a person has an income, he has security.’ However, such aspiration is accompanied by an awareness of the structural constraints and a way to cope with them. There is almost universal agreement that access to job opportunities depends on one’s social position, and that knowing or bribing someone is key to securing a job. According to a Serb from Shtërpçë/Štrpce: ‘Everything is the same if you know someone.’ The distorting effect of corruption and nepotism is spelled out in a response by a Prizren/Prizren resident: ‘If you know someone who has power in that place, then despite the [lack of] experience or educational background you get the job that belongs to a person who has a diploma.’ At the same time, the dialogues have revealed a pattern of acceptance of corruption and nepotism when it comes to employment. This is justified by the perceived unresponsiveness of state institutions in alleviating Kosovo’s high unemployment levels. A young man from Prizren/Prizren who works without a contract said:

‘It is the only job I could find, at least to be active and stay in my area of profession. I found this job thanks to my father and my experience, because otherwise I don’t think that political representatives would help me, just as they don’t help me find something more stable and profitable.’ At the same time, a villager from Vragoli/Vragolija recounts 10 unsuccessful attempts to get a job at the airport, without resorting to informal links.

Dialogues reveal that informal practices in securing access to education, healthcare or accomplishing other goals are common, reflecting the acceptance of informality as a strategy of change. An interlocutor from Obiliq/Obilić who said that he would not hesitate to bribe or search for a ‘right’ connection ‘given the situation’ reflected the culture of non-compliance that reinforces weak rule of law. Another interlocutor from South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica spoke about mistrust in the fairness and impartiality of the system of governance in Kosovo, saying that: ‘If I was adequate for a certain position, I would use people I know on the inside to get what I want. This is the only way the system functions.’ An interlocutor from Prizren/Prizren alleged that people do this because it is seen as the only possibility for survival and, therefore, it is not considered to be a violation of law.

Legal unpredictability, weak law and order, and institutional ineffectiveness are important factors in breeding mistrust in public policy and public officials. This applies to the provision of public goods more generally as illustrated by people’s complaints about poor physical and social infrastructure and insufficient assistance in securing livelihoods. Consequently, addressing insecurity in terms of material and social well-being in Kosovo almost inevitably involves resorting to informality, which ultimately perpetuates insecurity despite providing temporary and limited relief and gains.

### *Community solidarity*

In the post-conflict period in Kosovo, community solidarity has provided an infrastructure for informality and self-reliance. It has allowed citizens to cope with a range of uncertainties encountered in their daily life, but, at the same time, emerged as a barrier to people's attempts to alter their circumstances. The history of Albanians' peaceful resistance to the oppressive regime of the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milošević in the 1990s testifies to extraordinary ability of the Albanian community to self-organise in order to cope with adversity. This legacy carried over into the post-conflict stage, and impacts on people's ability to negotiate their security situation. Social networks in the Kosovo context are based on strong familial and clan (*fis*) relations, as well as distinctly localized connections framed by neighbourhoods (*mahallas*) and regions.

Dialogues on human security in Kosovo point to a strong sense of community regardless of ethnicity or geographic location. A number of interlocutors talked about helping neighbours and friends with stacking firewood, baby-sitting, looking after the elderly, picking up the groceries, house renovation, etc. In general, voluntary activity has not been recognized as an answer to state's inadequate public goods provision. By contrast, activities of international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been understood in terms of service provision, while their effectiveness is judged by their ability to fill gaps left by the state's dysfunction. Hence, a resident of North Mitrovicë/Mitrovica assessed the work of an international NGO as positive precisely because it created job opportunities in the projects they were running in the area. But, at the same time, Albanian and Serb communities view NGOs as another site of corruption. Both local and international NGOs were depicted disparagingly as 'working for their own interest,' according to an interlocutor from

Istog/Istok, or to ‘fill their pockets with money,’ according to an interlocutor from Prizren/Prizren. The criticism of formally-organized civil society was accompanied by a deeply-felt lack of accountability of state institutions, whether municipal or national. Common to responses in all communities in Kosovo was emphatic scepticism that complaining against irregularities in the work of public institutions can make a difference. According to an interlocutor, ‘In South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica you can complain as much as you like but your complaint will fall on deaf ears.’ Interlocutors talked about the length of time it took to hear a response when a complaint was lodged, if it was made. Most often, people did not pursue a formal complaint route, while reluctance to question authority is reinforced by previous unsuccessful or ineffective attempts. An interlocutor from South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica said, ‘I keep my complaints to myself; I don’t believe expressing them would change anything.’ Similarly, Serbs in Gračanica/Gračanica believe that the battle is lost even before it has started.

Consequently, faced with an unresponsive state, without conceiving of civil society as a possible alternative route to tackle the governance weaknesses, the fall-back strategy has been to use the density of networks, family or friends, to better one’s own immediate situation. A response from a citizen of Prishtinë/Priština captures the widespread opinion: ‘It is nearly impossible to achieve your goals in this country if you don’t know any officials or if you don’t have enough money to pay someone because over here everything is done like this.’ Similarly, both men and women related a sense of security to confidence because they felt supported by those close to them.

At the same time, the dialogue on the nature and impact of social links revealed a specific gender perspective on security, and constraints on the ability to change one’s circumstance

due to persistence of traditional and patriarchal mores. A female interlocutor in South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica said, 'I can't even wait for a friend alone in a café; everyone will talk.' Others remarked on the existence of social stigma and pressure on women, which limits their opportunities, such as taking a loan and starting business on their own. At the extreme, it also affects their physical safety. According to another interlocutor in South Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 'I was attacked once, and managed to escape, and I couldn't scream. I was scared the neighbours might hear. They would have said that it's somehow my fault.'

Lastly, despite a recent history of mass human rights violations, interlocutors did not single out inter-ethnic relations as a major concern; rather, the emphasis was on economic well-being. Dialogues did not reveal vibrant inter-ethnic communication either. However, interviewees did point to state institutions, mainly at the municipal level, as the focal point for inter-ethnic contact, whether it is an office, as our Istog/Istok example showed, or the multi-ethnic police service in Pejë/Peć. Apart from state institutions, dialogues point to trade and economy as another important site of fostering inter-ethnic contact and exchange. As the interlocutors from Graçanica/Gračanica testified, a number of recent friendships between Serbs and Albanians developed from what originally were business-centred inter-ethnic links, many of which were interactions in Kosovo's grey economy.

While community solidarity may prove to be an actionable resource and lead to some improvement in people's situation, a 'privatization' of political responsibility means that complaints are aired and discussed in familiar social settings among family and friends. Numerous dialogues referred to the 'coffee culture' in Kosovo, a consequence of a combination of unemployment and paucity of 'cultural' distractions, such as cinemas, concerts, etc. Taking complaints into the private sphere further entrenches the lack of

accountability of formal institutions. It is accompanied by the sense of powerlessness shared both by Albanians and Serbs, revealing a restrictive aspect of agency in a dense social and a dysfunctional institutional/state context in which it operates.

## **Conclusion**

We have proposed that not only are insights from the field useful in trying to break the impasse surrounding contested definitions of human security, but also that conceptualization can be inferred from methodology. Our key finding is the *multidirectional security marker* as a means of capturing the agential aspect of insecurity. The *marker* points to the agency of the vulnerable as they actively address their insecure predicament. It enriches our understanding of human security because it probes beyond multiple and interconnected sources of vulnerability. It reveals from the perspective of the vulnerable what those affected do to address insecurity alongside the effects of their actions. One remark by an interlocutor that he 'was not sure whom to bribe' encapsulates the type of complexity the *markers* seek to denote: he was frustrated at not just the necessity of bribing but the uncertainty about how to bribe in the most effective way. People in Kosovo have felt empowered by resorting to self-reliance, informality and community solidarity in order to change their immediate circumstances, yet without being able to relieve the causes of pervasive and multi-faceted insecurity associated with a weak state.

Our understanding of the nature of (in)security in Kosovo was assisted by the use of dialogue as a research tool. This tool went beyond traditional qualitative means for investigating insecurity to explore individuals' articulations of their own insecure situations.

Individual agency was a point of entry in designing this methodological approach. Such research practice was consistent with human security's conceptual shift of the focus of security from states to individuals and communities. In addition, our approach has been to collapse the distance between the outsider/researcher and those on the sharp end of insecurity, engaged as partners in the co-construction of the knowledge of security. Consequently, dialogue enabled us to capture aspects of security which are hidden and unacknowledged, and, therefore, not susceptible to traditional modes of inquiry where the subject is considered as a source of information only. Furthermore, dialogue also revealed a personal and emotional dimension, in which human security is as much about restoring a sense of self-worth as it is about initiatives to improve the economy, introduce rule-based governance or restore equality of opportunity.

In tracking the fine texture of data from these lived experiences and by probing the agency of individuals in fragile environments we have thus sought to grasp the inchoate nature of security. Opening up processes of knowledge production, which allow individual accounts to be constructed, acknowledged and validated, has resulted in a collaborative understanding of human security. This method furthered the meaning of the concept by revealing how agency and security interact. It not only captured the agential quality of human security pointing to people's actorness in face of pervasive insecurity, but it also revealed its contradictory effects. Exploring the agency of the vulnerable empirically thus provides one way of deepening the understanding of human (in)security. In this case, agency centres on the relationship between the individuals' capacity to act and their ability to improve their security situation. This has paradoxical effects. Their sense of empowerment also contributes to persistence of insecurity. This serves to highlight the important and unexpected dimension of individual agency and how it operates within the paradigm of human security. Ultimately, the

method used in this research project problematized how knowledge is produced in contemporary security studies and how processes of production themselves form part of the puzzle of what human security is and where it can be located. As reflexive beings capable of computing complex security dilemmas and active agents in the construction of safer environments, individuals can thus reclaim their rightful place in a person-centred concept of security.

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