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Tackling the Development and Security Paradox through Equity and Inclusion

Seven years after the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) galvanised global political support with the promise to "leave no one behind", we are at an inflection point where – as the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General declared – we will either "breakdown or breakthrough". If we wish to "breakthrough", then we must turn cycles of insecurity into dynamics that support human empowerment, cooperation and innovation. To do so, we need to shift mindsets to recognise that achieving greater equity and inclusion is at the heart of effective development that leads to greater security.

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Even though people are on average living longer, healthier and wealthier lives, globally six out of seven people feel insecure. The UN Development Programme has identified a trend in terms of which violent conflicts and insecurity paradoxically increase rather than decrease in parallel with human development. Indeed, human insecurity has been on the rise since before the COVID-19 pandemic, including in highly developed countries, and we are now seeing unprecedented spending on arms and unfulfilled promises to mitigate and address the climate crisis. Rather than advancing towards sustainable development, peace and security, we are at risk of drifting further away from our Global Goals, as the Secretary-General's stark warning suggests. How did this happen?

Looking more closely at recent global history, the trend of greater development moving in step with rising insecurity is hardly unexpected. According to the Secretary-General's "*Our Common Agenda*" report, four billion people lack universal social protection, including health care and basic income security, and the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed a further 124 million people into extreme poverty. Like all crises, COVID-19 has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and widened pre-existing gaps. Thus, while the combined earnings of workers around the world fell by US$3.7 trillion in 2020, the wealth of global billionaires increased by US$3.9 trillion. Growing inequity

makes society as a whole – including those enjoying relative privilege and security – more vulnerable to conflict and crisis, because threats such as COVID-19 transcend geographical boundaries and respect neither wealth nor status.

This short piece examines inequity as a critical factor giving rise to the trend that links development with insecurity, and explores how a polarity lens and gender lens can help us to more effectively confront a situation that may seem paradoxical and recognise the inherent and positive tensions that allow us to develop more effective responses.

A polarity lens

Development and security are currently perceived to be in a paradoxical relationship because we are experiencing their negative consequences that take the form of a vicious cycle. They are indeed inherently linked and therefore interdependent – and both can in fact serve and reinforce each other positively when viewed through a polarity lens that enables what could be called "both-and" thinking. Although the SDGs are framed as interdependent and indivisible, implementing them is challenging because we are often educated and socialised with a problem-solving mindset that leads us to see a particular issue in terms of opposing

aspects and fall into the trap of singular and polarising narratives that lead us to false choices.

An example of polarity thinking in the context of development and security is constituted by the concepts of output and outcome. Gross domestic product (GDP) was conceptualised in the 1930s to measure well-being by determining growth in terms of economic output or productivity only. The flaws in this reductive measure of a country's success and citizens' well-being were evident even to those who first conceptualised GDP, but globally it remains the dominant singular measure of well-being today. But it fails to capture the key foundations of human dignity and economic security: basic health, education, shelter, valid information, social protection and work-related security for the population as a whole, all of which are equitable outcomes.

Framed in the context of interdependent pairs, it is easy to see that we need to measure output AND outcomes – that the two are mutually reinforcing. If we invest in inclusive development, including health care, education, and environmental protection, we will be able to sustain economic growth across the population and support greater well-being for all. If we do not, we are likely to end up in a vicious cycle of extractive and potentially exploitative practices that increase GDP, but simultaneously give rise to unrest and insecurity. Yet the formal economy thinks only in terms of output. Polarity thinking helps us to see that output and outcome are not just related but interdependent, and that to achieve development and security we need to fully acknowledge and support both.

A gender lens

A gender lens allows us to recognise the human impact of singular narratives – especially when they are securitised. It also shows a positive path forward – where those who are made most vulnerable by policies and structures are brought to the centre of policies and decision-making. During COVID-19, unprecedented lockdown measures and school closures were framed as creating greater safety and security for all. However, the true picture was more nuanced, characterised by complex dynamics and interdependencies among people's individual circumstances, health and security. Emergency responses and a "war on COVID" narrative failed to recognise the differential impact of such policies, which created new vulnerabilities for women and children in particular. When the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors were curtailed by policies to limit the spread of COVID-19, women with limited social protection were hit the hardest economically. The closure of schools left them carrying an even higher unpaid care and household work burden. When official health measures restrained people's movements, many women and girls found themselves trapped inside their homes, fearful of violence committed by their family members as economic and social pressures mounted in a "shadow pandemic". A joint UN Women and UNDP report indicates that seven in ten women globally say abuse by a partner has become more common. The effort to achieve gender equality across political participation, economic empowerment, health and education fell back by a generation.

Inclusive security

Evidence shows that countries that mounted gendered and equitable responses to COVID-19 were able to recover more quickly and build greater resilience. The most effective countries were those with robust public services and gender-responsive social protection systems, long-standing networks, and high-level political commitment. Strong institutions with women's representation and leadership in executive positions, parliaments, and public administration resulted in greater accountability and higher public spending dedicated to addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Europe and Latin America, and on health care in sub-Saharan Africa. Equally, feminist movements and women's rights organisations provided an early warning system that highlighted the gendered impacts of the pandemic and directly influenced government policy in countries such as Chile and Brazil.

Research in several European countries shows that every euro invested in specialised VAWG services yields an average six-to-nine-times-greater return in social value, reducing the need for repeated police and social services interventions, hospital visits, emergency housing costs, and lost working hours, not to mention overall suffering

and trauma. Even countries with fewer resources managed to make a difference to women's and girls' security by collecting data and partnering with social media companies to make rapid gendered assessments and adjust responses, e.g. in Cameroon, Fiji, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Equally, Uzbekistan seized the opportunity to introduce reforms that paved the way for sustained progress on the prevention of and response to violence against women.

Vicious cycles can be turned into virtuous ones, but we need strong institutions with fair representation of diverse groups to close the equity and inclusion gaps and ensure that the people most vulnerable to insecurity are part of any solutions. At a time when democracy and multilateralism are being challenged, we should not turn our backs on institutions, but strengthen them through accountability mechanisms, partnerships, and technological innovations that enable us to develop more gender-disaggregated data and responsive policies. The UN Secretary-General's *"Our Common Agenda"* provides a framework for action, and a means to build trust, develop renewed solidarity among peoples and future generations, and manage in a more equitable and sustainable way critical global commons and global public goods, putting the Women Peace and Security and Youth Peace and Security agendas at the core. It is now up to each of us to challenge the assumptions and narratives we have been working with to date and adapt our thinking, policies and actions accordingly, both now and in the future.