



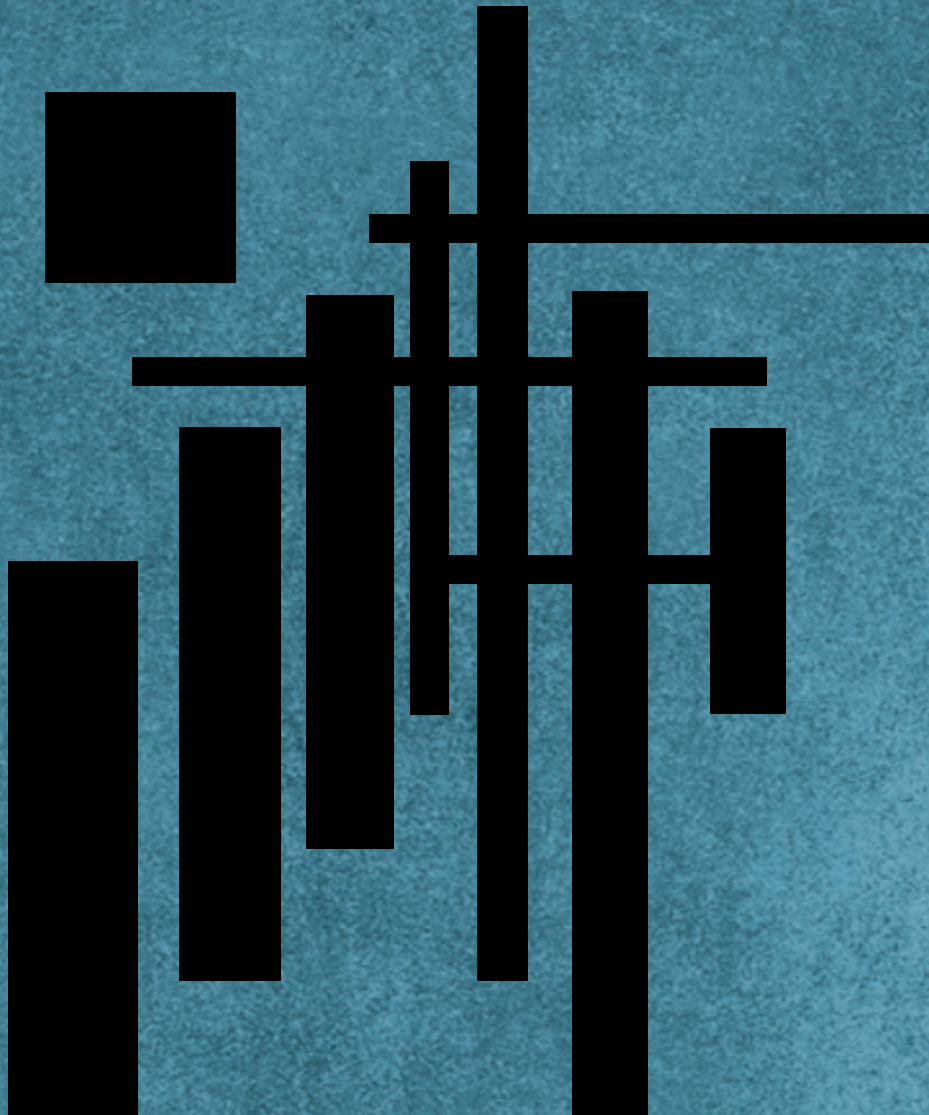
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# HUMAN SECURITY AT THE DIVIDING LINES

INSIGHTS FOR THE ADMINISTRATIVE BORDER LINE WITHIN GEORGIA



# **Human Security at the Dividing Lines:**

Insights for the Administrative Border Line within Georgia

Social Justice Centre  
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## Part I.

# Understanding Human Security in Border Zones

Borders are geographical features, lines drawn on maps that delineate one state from another. Borders are also legal, political, economic and social realities that divide people on each side from each other and define the limits of sovereign responsibility towards the population on its respective side. Where borders are settled, they are features of social and political order that structure every aspect of individual and community life, either directly or indirectly. But when there is disagreement over where a border line should be drawn or who should fall on each side of that line, borders become places of contestation and tension that disturb life for all on both sides.

Contested borderlands between neighbouring states can also become sites of armed confrontation and conflict. Contesting a border is a direct challenge to a state and may be considered an act of aggression, since borders shape the territory by which a state itself is defined. For this reason, the most traditional notions of security—as control of territory by military means—are most visible in contested borderlands. While conventional armed conflicts between states have become relatively rare in the international system since the end of World War 2, contested border zones are more likely than anywhere to become flash points where inter-state conflict threatens both the state and the population that lives in the contested zone.

As states take steps for their national defence, the repercussions for populations can be dire. Indeed, the safety and security of populations in contested border zones tend to suffer not only from the consequences of armed violence and militarized strategies for border security, but also from the limited ability of the state to meet its responsibilities for service provision within these zones. The social, economic and political effects can both weaken the state itself and exacerbate conflict over a border, creating a vicious cycle of violence and destabilisation that negatively affects populations and entrenches conflict.

Human security offers an alternative to the traditional state-based concept of security that makes state sovereignty and national defence conditional on the well-being of people and populations. Human security reorients the security discourse towards a more inclusive, people-centred approach, that puts socio-economic development and defence of human rights at the core of security policy. In this view, the purpose of national defence is protection of the rights and well-being of the population (rather than securing territory). This perspective upends traditional strategic calculations that justify military operations to win territory at the cost of human rights and well-being. A human-security approach to contested border zones thus demands a shift in interests, strategy, and perspective that can open new avenues to conflict resolution while prioritising the safety, prosperity, and human rights of the people most directly affected by border conflicts.

Populations that live on either side of contested borderlands are affected not only by ongoing conflict but also by the inability of the state to meet its obligations to protect rights and provide services that are otherwise foundational aspects of human security. The administrative border lines (ABL) that divide the Republic of Georgia from the self-proclaimed territories of South Ossetia and

Abkhazia are one such case. This article will examine the challenges the Republic of Georgia faces in providing human security for populations in these contested zones. Drawing on relevant experiences, laws, and policies from around the world, this article will examine the question of how a state can meet its responsibilities to assure the human security of populations in contested borderland areas.

## Expanding Notions of Security: The Shift to Human Security

Human security came to prominence in the international context in the early 1990s, challenging traditional state-centred security paradigms that focus primarily on military threats and territorial integrity.<sup>1</sup> In 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) issued a landmark edition of its Human Development Report arguing that security should encompass not just the protection of states from external aggression but also the protection of individuals from threats to their well-being.<sup>2</sup> This insight was centred on the idea that states have a responsibility to deliver “freedom from fear” for their populations, which means deepening the concept of security to include more personal forms of physical violence, such as interpersonal or gender-based violence. At the same time, the idea that people face existential threats due to structural deprivations highlight the state’s responsibility to provide for “freedom from want”. This broadening of the concept of human security came to include various social and economic dimensions, such as health, education, income, environmental sustainability, and political freedom.

The shift to a human security perspective redefines the role of the state to extend beyond military defence to include the responsibility for ensuring economic and social welfare, human rights, and environmental protection. Recognizing that insecurity often stems from complex, interconnected, global challenges, applying a human security lens to conflict resolution means examining the links between drivers of conflict at a structural and societal level. By broadening the scope of analysis, human security shifts the focus from state-centric, military-driven perspectives of how to gain territorial advantage towards a people-centred approach that prioritizes the safety and well-being of people affected by conflict. This approach broadens the analysis of conflict to include not only the direct violence of war but also the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that create insecurity for individuals and communities. It recognizes that factors like poverty, inequality, human rights violations, and environmental degradation often fuel conflict and that addressing these root causes is essential for sustainable peace.

The human security approach stands in contrast to traditional military-strategic approaches that primarily view security through the lens of territorial defence of state sovereignty. Traditional views thus focus on defeating opponents through force, often neglecting the needs and vulnerabilities of the civilian population as so-called collateral damage. This can lead to a cycle of violence where the root causes of conflict are left unaddressed. In contrast, human security emphasizes “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want” as core components of security, which calls for comprehensive strategies that integrate humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts, ensuring that the resolution of conflict prioritizes the protection and empowerment of people. A human-security approach thus redefines what it means for a state to provide security and in theory promotes long-term stability and peace..

Adopting a human-security perspective redefines the role of the state not only in warfighting but also in its responsibility to provide for the well-being of the population according to the various dimensions of human security. This idea is enshrined in the doctrine of the “responsibility to protect” developed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> Human security is a multidimensional concept that encompasses several aspects, including economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security. Each dimension addresses different threats to the well-being of individuals and communities, ranging from poverty, hunger, and disease to environmental degradation, violence, and human rights abuses.

At the state level, these aspects of human security have been operationalized through various types of policy and strategic commitments. For example, economic security is often pursued through poverty reduction strategies, social safety nets, and inclusive economic policies. Food security is addressed via agricultural policies, food distribution programs, and international food aid. Health security is operationalized through public health systems, universal healthcare initiatives, and responses to acute public health threats, such as pandemics. Environmental security is incorporated into policies focused on sustainable development, climate change mitigation, and natural disaster preparedness and response. Personal and community security are targeted through law enforcement reforms, people-centred national security, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding efforts. Promoting democratic governance, human rights protections, and inclusive political processes results in a system where the interests of the population (rather than the government of the day) are the source of political momentum. Such commitments involve intersectoral collaboration and can be integrated into overarching national security strategies, reflecting a broader understanding that meaningful security encompasses both protecting individuals from immediate threats and addressing the structural causes of insecurity.

## The Significance of Borderlands and Frozen Conflicts

Borders are unique sites of conflict because their inherent socio-political and economic dynamics make them flashpoints for tension and violence. Because borders demarcate the sovereignty of states, symbolizing the limits of political control and national identity, they are sites of intense contestation, where issues of territorial integrity, national security, and cultural identity converge.

Socio-politically, borders are often regions of ethnic and cultural diversity, where different groups may have historical claims or cross-border ties that challenge state boundaries. This can lead to conflicts over identity, autonomy, and self-determination, as seen in border regions like Kashmir or the Israel-Palestine conflict and many others. Additionally, borders can be areas of significant demographic pressure due to migration, whether driven by economic opportunities or populations fleeing violence. This can strain resources and heighten tensions between local populations and newcomers. Economically, borders are critical for trade and resource control, making them hotspots for economic conflict. Disputes over natural resources, smuggling, and control of trade routes can exacerbate tensions, especially in regions where state authority is weak or contested. Thus, borders are places where a variety of security concerns arise, where issues of sovereignty, identity, migration, and economic interests intersect, making them critical to understanding and resolving broader regional and international conflicts.

Contested borders in the context of so-called frozen conflicts are characterized by unresolved disputes and prolonged stalemates, where active warfare has ceased, but no formal peace agreement has been reached. These borders often reflect deep-seated ethnic, national, or territorial disagreements that remain politically sensitive and militarized. The lack of resolution keeps tensions high, with occasional flare-ups of violence. In these regions, borders may be recognized by the parties involved but not necessarily by the international community. This ambiguity leads to a complex security environment, where sovereignty and control are contested, and the status quo is maintained by a delicate and fragile balance of power. Examples include the borders in regions like Transnistria, Abkhazia, , and South Ossetia, where unresolved disputes result in persistent insecurity and hinder diplomatic efforts, economic development, and regional stability, perpetuating a state of limbo for affected populations.

The Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) with South Ossetia and Abkhazia is an example of a contested border in the context of a frozen conflict, encapsulating the unresolved tensions between Georgia and these breakaway regions, and heavily influenced by Russian involvement. The origins of this conflict trace back to the late Soviet period, where rising nationalist movements within Georgia clashed with the desire for greater autonomy in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. As the Soviet Union disintegrated in the early 1990s, both regions declared independence from Georgia, leading to conflict and violence. By the mid-1990s, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia had established de facto independence, though this was not recognized internationally, and the regions remain within Georgia's internationally recognized borders.

Tensions continued unabated throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, but the conflict became "frozen," with occasional skirmishes but no significant changes in the status quo. This uneasy peace was shattered in August 2008, when escalating tensions led to a Russo-Georgian War. Russian forces intervened decisively in support of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, quickly defeating Georgian forces. Following the war, Russia recognized the independence of both regions, solidifying their de facto separation from Georgia, but leaving the international status of the new self-declared republics unresolved. The ABLs were established in the aftermath of the 2008 war to delineate the territory controlled by South Ossetia and Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia. These borders are heavily militarized, with Russian troops stationed along the lines, creating a volatile and tense environment.

As contested borders, the ABLs symbolize the unresolved status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where neither side has achieved a definitive resolution. The conflict remains frozen, with periodic escalations but no movement toward a lasting peace. The ABLs restrict movement, isolate communities, and sustain the geopolitical standoff, making them central to the ongoing frozen conflict between Georgia and the breakaway regions.

The establishment of the ABL with South Ossetia and Abkhazia has led to significant human security concerns, profoundly impacting the lives of those in the surrounding areas.<sup>4</sup> One of the most pressing issues is the restriction of movement, which has resulted in the separation of families, disrupted livelihoods, and limited access to essential services like healthcare, education, and employment. This has created a humanitarian crisis where individuals are often cut off from vital resources and social support networks. The militarization of the ABL has heightened personal and community insecurity, with the constant presence of armed forces and periodic detentions of civilians crossing the line, exacerbating fear and uncertainty. Additionally, the ABL has led to economic insecurity, as many residents in these regions, traditionally reliant on agriculture and



trade, find their economic activities severely constrained by restricted access to markets and areas of production. Environmental security is also a concern, as restricted movement limits local populations' ability to manage and maintain their lands, leading to degradation and loss of livelihoods. The ongoing tension and uncertainty around the ABL perpetuate a sense of instability and vulnerability, underscoring the broader human security challenges in this frozen conflict zone.

## International Experiences of Human Security in Contested Borderlands

The experience of contested borders undermining human security is in no way unique to Georgia or the ABL. As in Georgia, states around the world have sought policy responses that can alleviate the negative effects of borderland insecurity and improve human security, as yet with mixed success. Building on a selection of international experience in providing human security in contested borderlands, this section distills a number of key issues states face in meeting these challenges. It explores how governments attempt to ensure human security across four critical areas: responsive and representative governance, security and conflict resolution, socio-economic development, and human rights protection. Drawing on examples from a range of cases illustrates the various public policy responses and institutional frameworks that have been tested in a variety of circumstances. Through these examples, the complexities of governing contested borderlands and the effectiveness of different approaches to human security become clearer.

### Responsive and Representative Governance

In contested borderlands, communities often face heightened vulnerabilities due to political instability, ethnic tensions, and economic hardship. Responsive and representative governance structures help meet these challenges by addressing the unique needs of border populations, ensuring that their concerns are audible to the power structures that can act to address them. The needs of the population in areas such as healthcare, education, and economic development are often neglected in contested borderlands. Governance that recognises and responds to these needs can reduce the sense of marginalization and neglect that often fuels discontent and unrest. Representative governance is equally important because it ensures that all ethnic, cultural, and social groups in borderlands have a voice in decision-making processes. This inclusivity can help to ease tensions by promoting dialogue and cooperation among diverse communities, reducing the likelihood of armed conflict. Moreover, governance structures that are both responsive and representative can foster trust between the state and borderland communities, making it easier to implement security measures that are seen as legitimate and fair. This, in turn, enhances overall human security by creating a more stable and cohesive environment, even in the context of contested borders.

In the Somalia-Somaliland context, the constitution adopted in 2001 created a legal framework for decentralized governance that allowed the self-declared republic of Somaliland to address local needs more effectively than the central government in Mogadishu.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Somalia, which has struggled with instability and weak governance, Somaliland's decentralized approach has enabled it to establish relative peace and stability. Local authorities in Somaliland, with deep understanding

of clan dynamics and regional needs, have implemented security and development policies that resonate with the local population. This localized governance has fostered stronger community trust and participation, helping to maintain order and address issues specific to the region, despite the broader conflict in Somalia.

In Timor-Leste, village councils have played an important role in participatory decision-making processes. These councils, composed of elected local representatives, ensure that community members are actively involved in decisions affecting their lives. By engaging diverse voices in dialogue and consensus-building, village councils help address local disputes, manage resources, and implement development projects that reflect the community's needs and priorities. This participatory approach can strengthen social cohesion, build trust in governance, and empower local populations, crucially enhancing stability and resilience in the fragile border regions of Timor-Leste.<sup>6</sup>

While responsive governance is promising, the conditions of contested borderlands typically undermine the ability of governments on either side of the border to govern effectively in these zones. Among the many challenges are weak governance and lack of institutional capacity to deliver services effectively, resistance from non-state actors or domestic political opposition to government authority and corruption and nepotism undermining the legitimacy of government institutions in general. While these challenges are serious enough in any governance context, their effect can be exponentially corrosive in contested borderlands.

In Abyei, a contested borderland between Sudan and South Sudan, governance challenges are marked by weak governance structures and a lack of institutional capacity. The region's ambiguous political status leaves it without a clear governing authority, resulting in poor service delivery and inadequate human security. Essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure are underdeveloped, leaving the local population vulnerable to poverty and conflict. The absence of effective governance also hampers law enforcement, exacerbating insecurity and displacement. These challenges highlight the critical need for stronger, more coordinated governance mechanisms to address the complex human security needs in Abyei.<sup>7</sup>

Governance challenges in delivering human security in contested borderlands are often intensified by resistance from non-state actors or domestic political opposition to government authority. In Kashmir, for example, a territorial dispute between India, Pakistan and China that dates from 1947 became an armed separatist movement in 1989. Under these circumstances, resistance to Indian government control has included undermining efforts to provide essential services, enforce the rule of law, and maintain public order. The presence of armed groups and widespread local dissent disrupt governance initiatives, creating a climate of fear and uncertainty. These challenges impede effective service delivery, exacerbating poverty, insecurity, and social fragmentation in the region.<sup>8</sup>

The governance challenges of corruption and nepotism are also exacerbated in contested borderlands, which can significantly undermine the legitimacy of government institutions in the times and places when building legitimacy and trust may be most crucial. Corruption and nepotism practices erode public trust and weaken the state's ability to deliver essential services effectively. In Kosovo, pervasive corruption and favouritism in political appointments and public administration hindered efforts to address poverty, unemployment, and ethnic tensions in the context of ongoing doubt over the territory's international status.<sup>9</sup> Such a lack of transparency and

accountability can fuel disillusionment among citizens, who perceive the government as self-serving rather than as a protector of their security and well-being. Consequently, these issues exacerbate social divisions and instability, undermining human security.

## Security Measures, Early Warning, and Conflict Resolution

Military and law enforcement security measures in contested border zones often have significant human security implications, impacting the lives of local populations in complex and often adverse ways. While these measures aim to maintain order and protect territorial integrity, they can also exacerbate insecurity for individuals and communities.

The heavy military presence in these zones can lead to the militarization of daily life, where civilians are subjected to frequent checkpoints, surveillance, and curfews. Such measures can restrict freedom of movement, access to essential services, and economic activities, leading to a deterioration in living conditions and increasing poverty. In addition, the use of force and the presence of armed personnel can heighten tensions, provoke violence, and result in human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, harassment, and excessive use of force.

In the fraught atmosphere of border disputes, law enforcement efforts may become militarised or may be invested in the political or ethnic biases relevant to the border conflict. When authorities reproduce such social tensions in their own operational strategies this can in turn deepen mistrust between communities and authorities, further fragmenting social cohesion. The focus on security often overshadows the need for development and human rights protections, leading to a cycle of instability and fear. The militarisation of border security can also result in a vacuum of civilian law enforcement, if military forces operating under a martial law framework supplant democratic policing. This can leave local populations without adequate legal or effective protections of their rights, increasing their sense of insecurity and pitting the experiences of populations against the apparent interests of national security. This is a false dichotomy that can undermine long-term peacebuilding efforts, as the emphasis on military and martial law enforcement responses can leave the root causes of conflict, such as political grievances and social inequalities, unaddressed. Striking a balance between so-called hard and soft security responses is a difficult policy, strategy and tactical challenge that must be tailored to each conflict context. However, adopting a human security approach makes it more likely that the best interests of the population will be central to any response. Centring any policy response on the best interests of the population forces policymakers to answer questions about the consequences of their actions that they may not otherwise ever be asked.

The deployment of Indian security forces in Kashmir to maintain law and order is an example of a security response to a border conflict that has had significant effects on human security in the region.<sup>10</sup> While these forces are intended to curb insurgency and prevent violence, their presence has often led to an atmosphere of fear and tension among the civilian population. Frequent security operations, curfews, and checkpoints restrict freedom of movement and disrupt daily life, limiting access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Reports of human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions and excessive use of force, have further deepened mistrust between the local population and security forces, exacerbating feelings of alienation and resentment. This has contributed to a cycle of violence and instability, where efforts to ensure security paradoxically

undermine the very human security they aim to protect. The heavy military presence in Kashmir thus highlights the complex and often adverse impacts of deploying defence and security forces in contested borderlands.

Intelligence and border controls are central components of security measures in contested border zones, but they also carry significant human security implications. Intelligence operations, while aimed at preventing threats and maintaining security, can lead to widespread surveillance and monitoring of local populations. This can fuel an atmosphere of suspicion, mistrust and fear, where individuals may feel their rights and privacy are constantly violated, and their everyday interactions are scrutinized. The targeting of specific communities or ethnic groups based on intelligence can exacerbate feelings of marginalization and discrimination, fuelling tensions and potential radicalization. Similarly, border controls, including strict checkpoints, identification requirements, and restrictions on movement, can also severely impact the daily lives of those living in border regions. These measures often limit access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and markets, cutting off communities from their livelihoods and support networks. Prolonged delays and the need for special permits can hinder economic activity and disrupt social ties, leading to increased poverty and social isolation. In extreme cases, stringent border controls can contribute to humanitarian crises, as populations are trapped in conflict zones or denied access to asylum. Together, intelligence and border controls, while intended to enhance security, can thus have profound negative effects on human security, particularly when not balanced with respect for human rights and community needs.

Investments in border security infrastructure along the Guyana-Venezuela border, aimed at preventing infiltration and cross-border threats, have had significant implications for human security in the contested region. The construction of barriers, surveillance systems, and military outposts has heightened tensions between the two nations, exacerbating an already volatile situation surrounding the long-standing dispute over the Essequibo territory.<sup>11</sup> For local communities, these measures have restricted movement, limiting access to traditional livelihoods such as farming and cross-border trade, which many depend on for survival.<sup>12</sup> The increased military presence has also led to fears of escalation and violence, creating an atmosphere of insecurity. Additionally, the focus on militarization has diverted resources from essential services, leaving local populations vulnerable to poverty, inadequate healthcare, and education. These security investments, while intended to protect national interests, have inadvertently undermined the human security of borderland communities, intensifying socio-economic challenges and contributing to a climate of fear and uncertainty in the region.

Despite the challenges, military, law enforcement, and intelligence forces can also play a crucial role in early warning, conflict prevention and conflict resolution in contested borderlands when their operations are carefully balanced with strategies that promote peace and stability.

Early warning mechanisms for conflict prevention along contested international borders involve the systematic collection, monitoring, and analysis of data to identify potential risks of conflict before they escalate into violence. Intelligence and border management are crucial assets in these roles. Early-warning systems track political, military, and economic indicators, such as rising political tensions, troop movements, and demographic changes in border regions. This information can be used to assess the likelihood of conflict by examining historical context, regional dynamics, and potential triggers like economic disputes or ethnic tensions. The goal is to detect signs of

escalation, such as increased violence or diplomatic breakdowns, and develop conflict prevention strategies that focus on mediation, confidence-building measures, and preventive diplomacy. However, these mechanisms face significant challenges, particularly in areas where sovereignty, identity politics, and mistrust between rival states complicate efforts at data-gathering and intervention. Contested borders often involve deep-rooted national, ethnic, or religious disputes, making conflict resolution more complex. In addition, disinformation, propaganda, so the use of forceful rhetoric can exacerbate tensions, rendering early warning efforts less effective. While technology can help to strengthen early-warning capabilities, the success of these mechanisms ultimately depends on timely and coordinated responses from stakeholders in the conflict and the willingness of the parties involved to engage in peaceful negotiations.

Security forces, when acting under a mandate that prioritizes the protection of civilians and respects human rights, can contribute valuable data to early-warning mechanisms and also help to create a secure environment that is necessary for dialogue and peacebuilding efforts to take root. Through collaboration with local communities and international organizations, these forces can support the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants, a critical step towards reducing violence and fostering reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, when security forces engage in confidence-building measures, such as joint patrols with community leaders or peacekeeping operations that include civilian protection mandates, they can help to build trust between conflicting parties. Effective intelligence sharing can also prevent escalations by addressing threats before they materialize, allowing for proactive conflict prevention. Additionally, well-managed border controls that facilitate the safe and legal movement of people and goods can reduce tensions by promoting economic stability and cooperation between communities on both sides of the border. Thus, security forces, when properly guided and integrated into a broader conflict resolution framework, can contribute significantly to the stabilization and long-term peace in contested borderlands.

Ceasefire arrangements, mediation, and peace agreements between Sudan and South Sudan have been crucial in enhancing human security in contested borderlands like Abyei. The establishment of ceasefire agreements has reduced violence, allowing displaced populations to return and rebuild their lives. Mediation and negotiation mechanisms, often facilitated by international actors, have created platforms for dialogue between conflicting parties, fostering trust and cooperation. The implementation of the nine peace agreements signed in 2012 has led to the demilitarization of disputed areas and the creation of joint border monitoring mechanisms.<sup>14</sup> These measures have improved access to humanitarian aid, reduced the threat of conflict, and promoted economic activities by reopening trade routes. By addressing underlying political grievances and creating frameworks for peaceful coexistence, these efforts have significantly enhanced human security in the border regions, providing a foundation for lasting peace and stability. The success of these initiatives underscores the importance of diplomatic engagement in resolving border conflicts.

Multiple human security challenges arise from insecurity. For example, the borderlands between Armenia and Azerbaijan, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh region, faced significant human security challenges due to persistent violence and armed conflict.<sup>15</sup> Despite numerous ceasefires and peace agreements, such as the 2020 ceasefire brokered by Russia, instability remained a constant threat. Failed ceasefires often lead to renewed hostilities, causing civilian casualties, displacement, and destruction of infrastructure, as illustrated in 2023 when Azerbaijan seized the enclave by force triggering a humanitarian crisis affecting 120,000 people. The conflict and instability exacerbated



food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and disrupted education, leaving the population vulnerable and traumatized. Moreover, in many cases, landmines and unexploded ordnance further endanger lives, restricting access to agricultural lands and prolonging economic hardship. The failure to achieve lasting peace perpetuates fear and uncertainty, hindering recovery and development efforts. In such volatile environments, communities live in a constant state of insecurity, with little hope for stability and peace. The situation in these borderlands underscores the profound impact of unresolved conflict on human security.

A lack of trust and cooperation between neighbouring states in joint security efforts significantly undermines human security in contested borderlands, as seen in the examples of India-Pakistan and the Sahel states. In the India-Pakistan context, particularly along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir, mutual distrust has led to frequent military skirmishes, cross-border shelling, and a heavily militarized environment.<sup>16</sup> This ongoing hostility exacerbates the insecurity of local populations, disrupting their daily lives, displacing communities, and limiting access to essential services. The absence of collaborative efforts to address underlying issues further perpetuates violence, deepening the human security crisis.

In the Sahel region, failed attempts at cooperation among states like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in addressing shared security threats such as terrorism and organized crime allowed these threats to proliferate despite the presence of major international peacekeeping operations. The porous borders and weak state presence have created safe havens for armed groups, leading to widespread violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises. Without coordinated security efforts, these states struggle to control the situation, leaving communities vulnerable to attacks and eroding their trust in government protection. In both regions, the failure to collaborate on security undermines efforts to build lasting peace and stability, leaving borderland populations caught in a cycle of violence and insecurity.

Inadequate resources and capacity to effectively police border regions as well as excessive security measures that repress some or all of the population are also significant factors undermining human security in contested borderlands. The lack of sufficient infrastructure, trained personnel, and logistical support hampers the ability of security forces to maintain order and address cross-border threats effectively. This inadequacy often leads to porous borders, enabling smuggling, illegal activities, and the infiltration of armed groups, which can destabilize a region and threaten local communities. In Timor-Leste, along the border with Indonesia, inadequate policing resources and excessive security measures have had tangible effects on human security. For example, in the early 2000s, the Border Patrol Unit (UPF) struggled with limited resources, insufficient training, and lack of equipment, which made it challenging to control illegal cross-border activities, such as smuggling and unauthorized movements of people.<sup>17</sup> Despite some successes, this inadequacy left border communities vulnerable to economic instability and criminal activities.

An equally dangerous dynamic can develop when security forces resort to excessive measures, such as inappropriate use of force or indiscriminate policing, the result is often the repression of the local population or targeted demographics. Besides their inherent injustice, such actions breed resentment, erode trust in authorities, and can exacerbate tensions between communities and the state. For example, in areas with a history of resistance, heavy-handed security tactics can reignite old grievances, undermining peacebuilding efforts and making it difficult to achieve lasting security and stability in the region. The increasing fortification of the US-Mexico border exemplifies these

dynamics in so far as the policing has increasingly involved military-style equipment and tactics as well as the deployment of military forces against civilians who do not pose a direct physical threat.<sup>18</sup> The US-Mexico border is in no way an isolated example. Similar dynamics were also visible in Timor Leste during the early years of independence when excessive security measures were sometimes employed by Timorese forces in response to perceived threats, particularly in border areas like Maliana.<sup>19</sup> The heavy-handed approach, including arbitrary detentions and aggressive patrols, often targeted former resistance members and others perceived as threats. This created fear and mistrust among the local population, exacerbating tensions and undermining the state's efforts to build legitimacy and trust in newly established security institutions.

Ultimately, these issues highlight the delicate balance needed to apply a human security approach to border security: insufficient resources or overly militarised approaches weaken law enforcement and security leaving populations vulnerable, while excessive measures can alienate the population. Both approaches ultimately compromise human security in contested areas.

## Socio-Economic Development

Socio-economic development in contested borderlands is a critical aspect of human security, both because poverty and injustice are an affront to human dignity, and also because they are underlying drivers of instability and conflict. By improving livelihoods through investments in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, socio-economic development reduces poverty, which is both an improvement in human security in its own right and an effective means of preventing unrest. In regions where access to resources and services is limited, socio-economic initiatives can enhance community resilience, promote social cohesion, and foster trust in government institutions. This, in turn, diminishes the appeal of insurgency or criminal activities as alternatives for marginalized populations, while increasing incentives to channel political activism within existing systems. Making development efforts inclusive and sensitive to local dynamics and ensuring that all communities benefit equitably, is essential to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or creating new inequalities.

Investment in infrastructure, such as road construction, plays a crucial role in improving human security in contested borderlands by enhancing connectivity and access to essential services. In the best-case scenario, improved roads and bridges boost local incomes and reduce poverty, for example by allowing local farmers to transport their goods to larger markets more efficiently. Additionally, better road connectivity improves access to healthcare services, which is particularly important in remote border areas where medical facilities are often far away and hard to reach. For example, road improvements can enable quicker and more reliable transportation of patients to hospitals, significantly reducing mortality rates from treatable conditions and maternal health. Moreover, infrastructure investments can also contribute to social cohesion by connecting isolated communities and fostering greater interaction and understanding between different groups by increasing access and contact. In this way, infrastructure may be a critical lever in improving human security in border areas. In Timor-Leste, for example, the construction and rehabilitation of roads in border regions like Bobonaro has had significant positive impacts on local communities,<sup>20</sup> enhancing human security in an area isolated due to rugged terrain and poor infrastructure by improving access to markets, healthcare, and education.

Promoting economic opportunities and job creation in borderlands is also a crucial aspect of the socio-economic dimensions of human security. However, it is essential to manage these projects carefully to avoid exacerbating tensions or displacing communities, which can undermine the intended human security benefits. For instance, another example also from Timor-Leste of the rehabilitation and construction of roads linking Suai, a key town near the Indonesian border, with other parts of Timor-Leste displaced traditional communities, cut neighbourhood ties and uprooted them without adequate compensation.<sup>21</sup> While the project was intended to stimulate socio-economic development (and in some ways arguably did so), this example highlights the mixed costs and benefits that may come with infrastructure investment.

The provision of social welfare programs is essential for enhancing human security in border areas by addressing poverty and inequality, which are often drivers of instability and conflict. Such programs play a crucial role in ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to basic necessities like healthcare, food, and education, thereby improving overall quality of life and reducing socioeconomic disparities. In contexts like Venezuela's border regions, social welfare initiatives have been pivotal in providing critical support to marginalized communities. For instance, the Mission Barrio Adentro healthcare program and the subsidized food distribution system called *Local Committees for Supply and Production*, or CLAP in Spanish contributed to improving health outcomes and alleviating hunger even in the context of a deeply flawed national strategy that ultimately collapsed.<sup>22</sup> By targeting the root causes of poverty and inequality, these programs staved off the desperation that can lead to political instability, social unrest, illicit activities, or forced migration. However, these examples also show how social welfare programs are easily manipulated as tools of political influence.<sup>23</sup> Even in less contested political settings, the effectiveness of such programs depends on efficient implementation and accountability, ensuring that resources reach those most in need and contribute to sustainable human security. In this way, they share much in common with humanitarian assistance in fragile settings.

In contested borderlands, limited financial resources and competing priorities significantly hamper development efforts crucial for human security. In these areas ongoing conflict and political instability diverts scarce resources towards military expenditures and immediate humanitarian needs, leaving little for long-term development projects. Investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education remain underdeveloped due to these financial constraints. The focus on addressing immediate security concerns often overshadows essential investments in socio-economic development, exacerbating poverty and hindering efforts to build lasting peace. Additionally, the allocation of resources is frequently influenced by political agendas, leading to uneven development and further entrenching inequalities between communities. These challenges make it difficult to address the root causes of conflict and insecurity, perpetuating a cycle of instability. Without adequate financial investment and a balanced approach to competing priorities, sustainable development and human security in these contested borderlands remain elusive.

Disparities in access to education and healthcare between urban centres and rural border areas significantly challenge human security in contested regions. In remote border areas or those that suffer political instability, communities often face shortages of qualified teachers, educational facilities, and healthcare professionals. Schools in rural borderlands are frequently under-resourced, leading to lower educational outcomes and limited opportunities for young people, which can fuel economic disparities and social unrest. Similarly, healthcare services are often sparse, with many residents unable to access essential medical care due to the lack of clinics, trained staff, and medical

supplies. This gap between urban and rural areas exacerbates poverty and limits the ability of border communities to improve their quality of life, making them more vulnerable to disease, malnutrition, and the socio-economic impacts of conflict. These disparities not only hinder personal development but also contribute to the broader instability and insecurity in the region, as marginalized populations are left without the means to escape the cycle of poverty and violence.

Vulnerability to external economic shocks and sanctions presents significant challenges for borderland communities, often exacerbating their fragility and undermining human security. In the case of Guyana's borderlands with Venezuela, this vulnerability is particularly acute due to the heavy reliance on cross-border trade for essential goods, such as fuel. When Venezuela faces economic sanctions or internal crises, the disruption in trade flows can lead to severe shortages in these Guyanese communities, driving up prices and creating scarcity of basic necessities. Such economic instability deepens poverty and increases the desperation of local populations, who may turn to migration or illicit activities as coping mechanisms. The reliance on a single, volatile trading partner makes these border regions especially susceptible to the ripple effects of external economic pressures, highlighting the broader risks associated with dependency on unstable economies. This fragility underscores the importance of developing more diversified and resilient economic strategies to shield borderland communities from the adverse impacts of external economic shocks and sanctions.

These dilemmas are also visible in the experiences of Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities on each side of the Green Line border that has divided the island of Cyprus since a ceasefire agreement of 1974. Initially, the ceasefire line had acted as a closed border between 1974 and 2003, effectively limiting international trade and movement between the northern, Turkish-controlled and southern, Republic of Cyprus, parts of the island. The opening of the border in 2003 allowed for increased movement between the north and south, which changed perceptions of the Green Line from a barrier to an interface. This marked a major shift in how people interacted with and experienced the division and in some dimensions an improvement in human security. Yet despite the legal recognition of Cyprus's EU accession in 2004, which included the entire island, *de facto*, the Green Line has continued to function as a hard border, with ongoing controls and limitations on the movement of people and goods. Thus, Turkish Cypriots, who were technically EU citizens due to their pre-1974 Cypriot citizenship, did not enjoy the full benefits of EU membership because of the political isolation of Northern Cyprus. Since 2004 the opening of the border has facilitated social and economic exchanges, enabling cross-border work, shopping, and tourism, which in turn began to alter the socio-economic landscape of the contested areas. The UN Buffer Zone also became a space of opportunity, particularly in areas such as tourism, even while still operating under the control of UN peacekeepers. Yet, tensions remain, with disputes over security and ownership continuing to shape border management policies and no foreseeable resolution to the frozen conflict in sight.<sup>24</sup> The experience of Cyprus demonstrates how tailored policies for border management can benefit communities on both sides of contested borders. It also shows how improvements on a single dimension of human security cannot alone resolve the conflict, even if this provides some momentum to begin to address other factors in the conflict, such as security, early warning and conflict prevention, representative government, or human rights protections.

## Human Rights Protection

The human rights dimensions of human security are especially relevant to contested borderland communities, because these are zones of special risk to the protection and fulfilment of basic rights. In these regions, the right to life and personal security may be threatened by ongoing conflict, militarization, and violence. Civilians may face arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and forced displacement, all of which undermine their fundamental rights and thus their human security.

The right to freedom of movement is a key concern, as borderland communities often encounter restricted access due to security measures, checkpoints, and territorial disputes, limiting their ability to access essential services, seek employment, or reunite with families and communities. Economic rights, such as the right to work and the right to an adequate standard of living, are often restricted when local economies are disrupted by conflict and instability. Fundamental human rights of access to education and healthcare are also often compromised in these areas due to underdevelopment, insecurity, and political neglect, exacerbating poverty and social inequality – a combined outcome that undermines human security. Moreover, the rights of minority and indigenous groups in contested borderlands are frequently violated, as they may face discrimination, marginalization, and cultural erasure as political targets in a conflict over territorial rights. Ensuring human security in these communities thus requires an analysis of the risks to human rights and the necessary actions for their protection. In the best-case scenario, such analysis should deliver an approach that addresses both immediate threats and the broader socio-economic conditions that undermine human security.

The creation and strengthening of legal frameworks to protect minority rights and freedoms are vital to human security and this is especially true in borderlands, where ethnic and cultural tensions often run high and may be instrumentalised in territorial disputes. In Cyprus, the division between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots has made minority rights protections crucial to maintaining peace and stability. Legal frameworks that guarantee equal rights and freedoms for both communities help to reduce tensions by ensuring that neither group is marginalized or discriminated against. For example, the Annan Plan, though ultimately unsuccessful, included provisions for power-sharing and minority rights that aimed to protect both Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities.<sup>25</sup> Strengthening legal protections for specific social groups through consociational power-sharing agreements—such as the Annan Plan proposed—can foster trust between communities, reduce the potential for conflict, and promote a sense of inclusion and fairness. While consociationalism is not uncontested, it is also not the only form of legal framework that can ensure all groups feel secure and valued within a political system. The legal frameworks for the protection of minority rights at both international and national levels apply equally in contested borderlands even when the states responsible for their implementation neglect their duty of care in the face of tension and conflict.

The prosecution of perpetrators of human rights violations through national judicial systems, including the establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions, is a crucial way that the legal framework can enhance human security in contested borderlands. The Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office, for example, were created to address war crimes, crimes against



humanity, and offenses involving citizens of Kosovo or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the war of 1998-2000. While created by international agreement, based in the Hague and staffed by international personnel, its establishment was ratified by the Kosovo Assembly, and written into national law through the Law on Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office and a Constitutional Amendment.<sup>26</sup> There have been a range of similar transitional justice mechanisms established since the end of the Cold War with the aim of addressing past grievances, restoring the rule of law, and deterring future violations.<sup>27</sup> Among the most recent examples are Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace established in 2016 as part of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas,<sup>28</sup> and the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission of the Gambia launched in 2018 to investigate human rights abuses committed during Yahya Jammeh's regime.<sup>29</sup> Similar initiatives were also launched during the abortive transitions in Sudan following the 2019 revolution and in Myanmar before the military reasserted control.

These mechanisms are intended to hold perpetrators accountable and provide a platform for victims to voice their experiences, with the aim of promoting healing, rebuilding trust in state institutions, and preventing the recurrence of violence. This, in turn, strengthens human security by fostering a culture of respect for human rights and the rule of law, which is essential for promoting peace and stability in contested border regions.

The inverse of this logic is evident in the fact that impunity for human rights violations due to weak judicial systems and a lack of accountability presents significant human security challenges, as illustrated by experiences in borderlands like those between Somalia and Somaliland.<sup>30</sup> In these regions, the fragile state of the judiciary allows perpetrators of violence, including extrajudicial killings, sexual assaults, and unlawful detentions, to evade justice. In Somalia, where the judiciary is fragmented and under-resourced, this lack of accountability perpetuates a cycle of violence and insecurity, especially in border areas where law enforcement is weak. In Somaliland, although more stable, the reliance on customary law over formal legal systems in border regions can result in inconsistent justice and further impunity, particularly for powerful local actors. This ongoing impunity erodes trust in state institutions and exacerbates tensions between communities, undermining efforts to build lasting peace and security in these contested borderlands. Without strengthening judicial mechanisms and ensuring accountability, human security remains precarious in these vulnerable areas, while failure to resolve conflict over borders makes it difficult to take action on these issues.

Discrimination and marginalization of minority groups, even with legal protections in place, severely undermine human security by weakening human rights protections and fostering exclusion, resentment, and conflict. In Kashmir, despite constitutional safeguards intended to protect the rights of all communities, the region's Muslim majority has often faced systemic discrimination and marginalization. This situation is exacerbated by heavy-handed security measures and political actions, such as the 2019 revocation by the Indian Government Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which stripped Kashmir of its special autonomy.<sup>31</sup> These measures were perceived by some as undermining the human rights of the Kashmiri people, intensifying feelings of alienation and injustice. The failure to fully implement legal protections results in widespread mistrust of government institutions and can perpetuate a cycle of violence and instability. When human rights protections are not effectively upheld, the security and well-being of marginalized communities are compromised, leading to ongoing discrimination, unrest, and deteriorating human security in this disputed region.

# Operationalising Human Security in Contested Borderlands

Operationalizing human security in contested borderlands requires a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that addresses the complex and interrelated challenges unique to these regions. This section explores ten key elements essential for developing policies that prioritize human security. The discussion also examines how human security can be integrated into various legal and policy frameworks, such as national security strategies, sustainable development plans, and human rights laws, to meet government obligations. Finally, the section provides an overview of international standards and indexes, that may serve as benchmarks for measuring progress in human security within contested borderlands.

## Ten key principles for operationalizing human security

As explained above, operationalizing human security means prioritizing the safety and well-being of individuals and communities, rather than solely focusing on state security. Such an approach involves a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy that addresses various aspects of human security, including economic stability, health, environmental protection, and human rights. Developing policies through inclusive processes, that engage local communities helps ensure their needs and perspectives are central to resulting strategies. By emphasizing prevention, early warning, and resilience-building, a human security approach seeks to mitigate risks and address the root causes of insecurity, fostering long-term peace and development in vulnerable and contested regions. This is complex policy-making challenge that can impose real demands on institutions of government that are comfortable working within their traditional mission-based silos or may lack capacity for a policy-making challenge of this scale. For this reason, leadership at the highest levels will be necessary to operationalise human security. In moving towards this goal, the following principles and standards can inform policy development to ensure a better outcome for human security:

1. **Multi-dimensionality:** Multi-dimensionality is the starting point of policy for human security, because it recognizes that security is not limited to physical protection from violence but also includes economic, environmental, food, health, personal, community, and political security. In the context of contested borderlands, policies and interventions must address these diverse dimensions comprehensively to effectively safeguard the well-being of affected populations. By adopting a multi-dimensional approach and taking a sectoral approach to policymaking, decisionmakers can integrate more aspects of human security into their institutional policies and strategies. This in turn improves the likelihood of creating more holistic solutions that tackle the root causes of insecurity and promote sustainable peace and development in fragile border regions.
2. **Participation and empowerment through community engagement:** Participation and empowerment through community engagement are essential for effective policy development in contested borderlands, because involving affected communities in decision-making processes

is the best way to ensure that policies are responsive to the specific needs and challenges of people of these regions. By empowering local populations to actively participate in shaping the policies and practices that directly impact their human security, these mechanisms foster a sense of ownership and legitimacy, which is crucial for the successful implementation of government policy for human security. Moreover, when communities are engaged and empowered, they are more likely to contribute to the long-term sustainability of peace and security efforts, as their unique insights and experiences help create solutions that are both culturally relevant and practically effective. Finally, community engagement is the most important source of feedback on the effectiveness of policy design and implementation: it should feed into every aspect of policy development and review.

3. **Prevention and early warning:** Prevention and early warning are critical components of policy that promotes human security in contested borderlands, because they allow for the timely identification and mitigation of emerging threats. By prioritizing preventive measures, governments can address the root causes of instability—such as resource conflicts, political tensions, and economic disparities—before they spiral into larger crises. Establishing robust early warning systems enhances this approach by providing real-time data and analysis, ideally enabling swift and targeted responses that protect communities from the worst impacts of conflict and ensure long-term stability and security in these volatile regions. Prevention and early-warning also tie-in with community engagement principles since the communities affected are likely to be the best source of data for prevention and early warning.
4. **Human rights-based approaches:** A human rights-based approach is fundamental to human-security policy development in contested borderlands, as it ensures that all interventions and policies are grounded in the principles of non-discrimination, equality, and accountability. By upholding these principles, policy can protect the most vulnerable populations, ensuring that everyone has equal access to resources and services, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or social status. Moreover, by embedding accountability into the policy framework, this approach fosters transparency and trust, holding actors responsible for their actions and guaranteeing that human rights are respected and promoted, thereby enhancing overall human security in these challenging environments. The stakes are high because policy that fails to apply a human rights-based approach will ultimately be self-defeating from a human security perspective.
5. **Sustainability:** Sustainability involves promoting development practices that not only address immediate needs but also tackle the root causes of human insecurity, such as poverty, inequality, discrimination and resource scarcity. By focusing on sustainable solutions, policies can help build long-term resilience in communities, ensuring they are better equipped to withstand future challenges and reduce their dependence on external aid. Additionally, sustainable development practices can address conflict drivers linked to resource scarcity, such as competition over land, water, and food, thereby reducing tensions and contributing to lasting peace and human security in these sensitive border regions.
6. **Conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding:** Fostering a nuanced understanding of the underlying dynamics of conflict within and between communities in contested borderlands is essential to planning how a policy intervention might impact local tensions and vulnerabilities. On this basis policies can be designed to avoid or mitigate unintended consequences that could escalate conflict. Additionally, integrating peacebuilding strategies into policy development helps to foster dialogue, reconciliation, and trust among divided communities, laying the groundwork for sustainable peace and enhancing overall human security in volatile regions.
7. **Gender sensitivity:** Gender sensitivity in policy development is crucial for recognizing and addressing the distinct human security needs and vulnerabilities of women, men, girls, and boys

in contested borderlands. By acknowledging these differences, policies can be tailored to ensure that the entire population receives appropriate protection and support, particularly in areas like access to healthcare, education, and protection from violence, which are fundamental to human security. Incorporating a gender-sensitive approach not only promotes equality and empowerment but also strengthens the overall resilience of communities, making them better equipped to withstand the pressures and challenges of conflict and instability, thus contributing to long-term human security.

8. **Effective coordination and collaboration:** Effective coordination and collaboration among governments, international organizations, civil society, and local communities are essential for maximizing the effectiveness of comprehensive human security strategies in contested borderlands. By aligning efforts and sharing resources (including most critically information and contacts), these diverse actors can address complex and interconnected challenges more holistically, ensuring that initiatives are more comprehensive and ideally, mutually reinforcing. Furthermore, collaboration fosters trust and inclusivity, empowering local communities to actively participate in decision-making processes, which enhances the legitimacy and sustainability of policies aimed at improving human security in these volatile regions. Achieving fruitful collaboration requires a well-designed and resourced coordination mechanism that can leverage the comparative advantages of each actor.
9. **Robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E):** Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation and impact of human security policy is the only way to know whether policy is working and what needs adjustment. M&E based on robust data collection and analysis is vital for policy development in contested borderlands because the volatile regions may be subject to rapid change. While this requires a significant investment of resources, it is the only way to produce evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of human security initiatives, of the kind that can enable continuous improvement and adaptation in strategy. Accurate data collection and analysis allow policymakers to identify emerging threats, assess the impact of interventions, and ensure that resources are allocated efficiently to areas of greatest need. M&E also promotes transparency and accountability, building trust among stakeholders and ensuring that policies are responsive to the complex dynamics and the volatility of borderland regions.
10. **Sufficient institutional accountability and resources:** Institutional capacity depends on accountability for result and the efficient deployment of available resources to policy goals. Where institutions are weakened by corruption or incompetence, policies will not be effectively implemented and monitored, undermining potential improvements in people's lives. Strong accountability mechanisms help prevent corruption and misuse of resources, ensuring that resources benefit those for whom they are intended. Since the demands of human security will always outstrip the resources available, effective resource management is essential in order for institutions to allocate limited resources strategically, to address the complex and multi-dimensional challenges of contested border zones. Depending on the context, it may be that an investment in institutional capacity for human-security policymaking is a necessary first step in addressing human security in border zones.

## Centring human security in legal and policy frameworks

In contested borderlands, human security can be integrated into legal and policy frameworks by addressing the unique vulnerabilities of these regions. The following gives an overview of how various types of legal and policy frameworks can be refocused on human security. While these are

national instruments that affect policy across an entire territory, their effect will also be felt in contested borderlands:

**National security strategies** can shape human security in contested borderlands by broadening the focus from traditional military threats to include the protection of individuals and communities. These strategies can promote preventive measures, community engagement, and inclusive security planning, addressing the root causes of instability and fostering long-term peace and stability in these regions.

**Sustainable Development or Poverty Reduction Plans** can shape human security in contested borderlands by targeting economic disparities, improving infrastructure, and providing essential services like healthcare and education. By addressing the root causes of poverty and promoting economic opportunities, these plans help reduce conflict drivers and build resilient, stable communities in vulnerable regions.

**Human security policy** can shape security in contested borderlands by adopting a comprehensive approach that addresses economic, environmental, and social vulnerabilities. By prioritizing community involvement and integrating diverse security dimensions, such policies promote resilience, reduce conflict, and ensure that the specific needs of borderland populations are met, fostering lasting stability and peace.

**Human rights laws and instruments**, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), shape human security in contested borderlands by ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations, enforcing accountability for abuses, and upholding justice. By guaranteeing access to legal recourse and safeguarding rights, these frameworks help prevent discrimination, reduce tensions, and foster a more secure and equitable environment for all communities. A national focus on strengthening implementation can change how rights are experienced by borderland populations.

**Peacebuilding and conflict resolution frameworks** in a national context can shape human security in contested borderlands by promoting dialogue, reconciliation, and inclusive decision-making. These frameworks address underlying grievances, foster trust among conflicting groups, and create conditions for lasting peace, thereby reducing violence and enhancing the safety and well-being of borderland communities.

**Disaster risk reduction policies** shape human security in contested borderlands by enhancing resilience to natural and man-made disasters. By applying international principles like the Sendai Framework<sup>32</sup>, these policies focus on risk assessment, preparedness, and community-based resilience, reducing vulnerabilities, preventing displacement, and ensuring that border communities can recover swiftly and sustainably from crises.

**Gender equality and women's empowerment policies**, including National Action Plans (NAPs) under UN Security Council Resolution 1325,<sup>33</sup> shape human security in contested borderlands by promoting women's participation in peace processes, protecting against gender-based violence, and ensuring equitable access to resources. National policies based on the 1325 framework can enhance resilience and foster inclusive, sustainable peace in vulnerable border regions.



**Laws and policies for refugees and internally displace people**, guided by international principles like the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement,<sup>34</sup> shape human security in contested borderlands by ensuring protection, access to essential services, and durable solutions. Incorporating these frameworks into national policies can help stabilize populations, reduce conflict, and promote human rights in fragile borderlands.

**Transitional justice mechanisms**, guided by international principles such as those in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, shape human security in contested borderlands by addressing past human rights violations, fostering reconciliation, and promoting accountability. As discussed in the previous section, these processes can help heal communities, restore trust, and lay the foundations for lasting peace and stability in conflict-affected border areas.

**Civilian Protection Strategies**, guided by international principles like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as established by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. (2001),<sup>35</sup> shape human security in contested borderlands by safeguarding civilians from violence, ensuring access to humanitarian aid, and reducing harm during conflicts. These strategies prioritize the safety and dignity of non-combatants, helping to prevent atrocities and promote peace in vulnerable regions.

## Using international standards and indexes to gauge progress

International standards or indexes are benchmarks and tools used to measure and compare various aspects of social, economic, and political performance across countries or regions, providing a consistent framework for assessing progress and guiding policy decisions. They play a crucial role in providing reference points for measuring progress in human security within contested borderlands. These tools offer a structured approach to evaluating various dimensions of security, governance, socio-economic development, and human rights, allowing policymakers and stakeholders to assess the effectiveness of interventions and guide future strategies. The following overview explores key international standards and frameworks across several categories.

International standards that focus on governance or institutional frameworks distil the set of rules, policies, and structures through which authority is exercised, decisions are made, and public resources are managed to ensure effective administration, accountability, and the promotion of societal well-being. One example is the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Index (HDI),<sup>36</sup> which is a widely recognized tool that measures a country's average achievements in three basic dimensions of human development: health (life expectancy at birth), education (mean years of schooling and expected years of schooling), and standard of living (Gross National Income—GNI—per capita). In the context of contested borderlands, the HDI can provide insights into the effectiveness of governance and institutional frameworks in promoting human security. By tracking progress in these areas, the HDI helps identify gaps in service delivery and highlights the need for targeted interventions to improve living conditions, reduce inequalities, and strengthen institutional capacity in these fragile regions.

International standards and indexes on security measures and conflict resolution can be used to measure human security in contested borderlands by providing objective, comparative data on the levels of violence, conflict intensity, and the effectiveness of peace efforts. These tools evaluate

factors such as the frequency of armed conflicts, the impact of terrorism, the presence of peace agreements, and the extent of political instability. By applying these standards and indexes, policymakers and researchers can assess the progress in reducing violence, protecting civilians, and resolving conflicts, offering a comprehensive view of the security environment in contested borderlands. This helps determine whether human security is improving and guides the allocation of resources and the design of further interventions to enhance stability and peace. One example is the Global Peace Index (GPI), developed by the Institute for Economics and Peace,<sup>37</sup> measures the relative peacefulness of countries and regions based on indicators related to levels of violence, conflict, and militarization. In contested borderlands, the GPI can be an essential tool for assessing security conditions and the effectiveness of conflict resolution efforts. By examining factors such as the prevalence of internal conflicts, the intensity of organized violence, and the impact of terrorism, the GPI provides a comprehensive overview of security dynamics in these regions. This information is critical for guiding peacebuilding initiatives, informing security policies, and measuring the success of interventions aimed at reducing violence and promoting stability. In the context of Georgia's contested borderlands, the GPI can help assess the overall security situation, tracking changes in conflict intensity, the presence of military forces, and the effects of violence on civilian populations. The index thus offers valuable insights into whether peacebuilding efforts are succeeding and where additional interventions might be necessary to reduce conflict and enhance security.

Socio-Economic Development Initiatives can be used to measure human security in contested borderlands by assessing key indicators such as access to basic services (healthcare, education, clean water), economic opportunities (employment, income levels), and infrastructure development. These initiatives provide insights into how well communities in these volatile regions are thriving, identifying areas where poverty, inequality, and lack of resources may contribute to insecurity. By tracking improvements in living standards, these measures help gauge the effectiveness of interventions designed to enhance stability and resilience, offering a clear picture of whether human security is being strengthened in these challenging environments. The Social Progress Index (SPI)<sup>38</sup> for example offers a holistic measure of a society's well-being by evaluating factors beyond economic performance, including basic human needs, foundations of well-being, and opportunities for individuals. In contested borderlands, where socio-economic conditions are often precarious, the SPI provides insights into the impact of development initiatives on human security. By assessing indicators such as access to basic medical care, water and sanitation, education, and personal rights, the SPI helps policymakers understand how well communities are thriving and where additional support is needed. This index is useful for tracking the progress of socio-economic development programs and ensuring that they address the specific needs of borderland populations.

International standards and indexes on human rights protection and the rule of law, such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Human Rights Indicators<sup>39</sup> and the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index,<sup>40</sup> can be used to measure human security in contested borderlands by assessing the extent to which fundamental rights are upheld and legal systems function effectively. These tools evaluate factors such as access to justice, protection against discrimination, freedom from arbitrary detention, and the accountability of security forces. By applying these standards and indexes, stakeholders can determine how well human rights are protected in volatile regions, identify areas where violations are prevalent, and gauge the effectiveness of legal and institutional frameworks in maintaining the rule of law. This measurement is crucial for understanding the broader human security landscape, as strong human

rights protections and a functioning legal system are key to ensuring safety, dignity, and stability in contested borderlands. The OHCHR Human Rights Indicators, for example, offer a framework for assessing a country's adherence to international human rights standards. These indicators cover a wide range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. In contested borderlands, where human rights violations are often prevalent, these indicators are crucial for measuring the protection of rights and the strength of the rule of law. By evaluating factors such as the accessibility of justice, protection against discrimination, and the effectiveness of law enforcement, these indicators provide a clear picture of the human rights environment in these regions. This information is vital for guiding policy decisions, holding violators accountable, and ensuring that human security is grounded in the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms.

International standards and specialist indexes focusing on regional or conflict-related issues, can be used to measure human security in contested borderlands by providing detailed, context-specific insights into the dynamics of conflict and violence. These tools track indicators such as the frequency and intensity of armed conflicts, incidents of political violence, and the geographic spread of unrest. By analysing this data, policymakers and researchers can assess the immediate security threats faced by populations in contested borderlands, monitor the effectiveness of peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts, and identify emerging risks. These specialist indexes offer a nuanced understanding of the regional and conflict-specific factors that influence human security, enabling more targeted interventions and the development of strategies that address the unique challenges of these volatile areas.

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) tracks the occurrence and intensity of conflicts worldwide.<sup>41</sup> It provides detailed data on armed conflicts, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence, making it an essential tool for understanding conflict dynamics in border regions.

The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) provides real-time data on political violence and protest events, including information on conflict actors, locations, and fatalities.<sup>42</sup> This granular data is particularly useful for monitoring ongoing conflicts in contested borderlands and assessing the impact of interventions aimed at reducing violence. In Georgia's border regions, ACLED can track incidents such as armed clashes, bombings, and civilian targeting, providing real-time information that is critical for understanding the immediate security threats faced by communities. This data helps in identifying hotspots of violence and monitoring the effectiveness of ceasefires or peace agreements.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Regional Well-Being Index measures well-being across various regions within countries, focusing on factors such as income, jobs, health, education, and safety.<sup>43</sup> This index can highlight disparities between borderlands and more stable regions, providing insights into the socio-economic challenges that affect human security in contested areas.

International standards and frameworks such as those described above can serve as invaluable tools for measuring progress in human security within contested borderlands. By providing a comprehensive assessment of governance, security, socio-economic development, human rights, and conflict dynamics, these frameworks guide policymakers in designing and implementing effective interventions that promote peace, stability, and well-being in these fragile regions. Through consistent monitoring and evaluation using these tools, stakeholders can better

understand the complexities of human security in contested borderlands and work towards sustainable solutions that address the root causes of instability and enhance the lives of those affected.

## Part II

# Human Security in Georgia's conflict-affected regions

As analyzed in the first section, the concept of human security is multidimensional, encompassing not only physical security but also social and economic layers, along with elements related to human rights and equality. Observations of villages located along the so-called dividing lines of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions and numerous studies investigating these areas' conditions indicate that all dimensions of human security present significant challenges for the local population.

Along the administrative boundary lines (ABLs) of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, there are 116 villages, where, according to the 2014 census, 46,352 individuals reside. However, more recent studies suggest a significant decline in population, primarily due to various human security challenges. According to a 2019 study conducted by UN Women, when comparing the 2014 census data with the 2002 census,<sup>44</sup> the population had decreased by 33%. Furthermore, residents of ABL villages frequently report that their communities are becoming increasingly depopulated due to harsh living conditions, security risks, and a lack of development opportunities. A 2021 study conducted by the ICCN revealed<sup>45</sup> that 61.5% of residents in ABL villages rated the deterioration of living conditions as severe. Moreover, nearly the entire population—98%—identified unemployment as a critical issue. The unemployment rate is nearly equivalent to the occupation problem, indicating that residents perceive both as equally pressing challenges.

This section of the article provides a descriptive analysis of the conditions in villages along Georgia's ABLs, based on a compilation of existing research and observations conducted by the Social Justice Center during field visits to these villages.

### **Physical Security**

The physical security of residents living along the ABL is alarming, as they face ongoing threats of illegal detentions, abductions, and borderization. According to reports from the State Security Service of Georgia, between 2016 and 2023, 363 individuals were detained in the direction of Abkhazia, while 659 were detained in the direction of the Tskhinvali region. Although the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) operates in the Tskhinvali region under the Geneva International Discussions framework—meeting every three months in Ergneti—the number of abductions and detentions remains critical. Notably, in 2023, the number of abductions doubled compared to the previous year. Additionally, some of these detentions and abductions occur within Georgia's government-controlled territory. In 2023, Russian occupation forces killed Georgian

citizen Tamaz Ginturi in the village of Kirbali, marking another grave crime committed by the occupying forces.

A key challenge identified by residents regarding physical security is the lack of police stations and irregular patrolling.<sup>46</sup> A 2019 UN Women study found that 83% of ABL villages lacked police stations (97% in Abkhazia and 78% in the Tskhinvali region), and regular patrolling was absent in 34% of these villages. A 2022 study by the Association of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) "Consent" similarly found that 63% of villages along the Tskhinvali region's ABL lacked police stations.<sup>47</sup>

Residents consistently demand the permanent presence of law enforcement and regular monitoring and patrolling. They also emphasize the need for an early warning system to counteract ongoing abductions and borderization. Additionally, in villages near the Tskhinvali region, residents stress the importance of installing surveillance and security cameras in high-risk areas where illegal detentions and abductions frequently occur. Furthermore, they highlight the necessity of establishing a visible boundary line distinguishing occupied and government-controlled territories, as the absence of such a demarcation often leads to inadvertent crossings, resulting in illegal detentions.<sup>48</sup>

The "invisible occupation line," the absence of an early warning system, the lack of security measures such as surveillance cameras and regular patrols, and the systematic nature of abductions and detentions all contribute to an intensified perception of physical insecurity among ABL residents. This, in turn, significantly impacts the overall quality of human security in these areas.

## **Social and Economic Security**

The social, economic, and humanitarian conditions of ABL residents have remained fragile and unstable since the establishment of these dividing lines. The Georgian government lacks a sustainable vision and policy framework to support communities living under the continuous threat of conflict and occupation. Quantitative data from various studies indicate that the socio-economic situation of ABL residents has remained largely unchanged over the years, demonstrating a persistent lack of improvement.

Among the major social challenges is the infrastructural underdevelopment in ABL villages, which results in limited access to basic resources. According to a 2019 UN Women study, 91% of ABL villages lack paved roads, 90% have no access to pharmacies, 85% struggle to obtain firewood, 70% lack kindergartens, 57% have no medical facilities, 36% are not connected to a gas supply, and 41% lack access to food stores.<sup>49</sup> A similar study conducted in 2023 examining IDP settlements and villages along the ABL of the Tskhinvali region reported that 93% of villages lacked pharmacies, 73% faced difficulties in accessing firewood during winter, 60% had no kindergartens, 40% lacked grocery stores, and 40% had no access to public transportation.<sup>50</sup>

A 2021 ICCN quantitative study further illustrated the dire social conditions in these communities. More than half of ABL residents reported experiencing severe hunger and inadequate nutrition, over 68% identified a shortage of medication as a critical issue, 98% cited unemployment as a major problem, and 60% expressed concerns over rising loan costs.<sup>51</sup>



The intersection of physical insecurity with cascading social and economic hardships renders daily life in ABL villages extremely difficult, severely affecting all dimensions of human security, including human rights. Despite this, the government has yet to formulate a comprehensive policy outlining concrete steps to mitigate the ongoing threats posed by occupation and address the socio-economic barriers consistently reported by residents.

## Conclusion

Human security is a challenging concept both in its breadth and complexity. At the same time, it offers a normative clarity as to the purpose of effective, accountable government. This article began by explaining the development of this concept and its immediate relevance for contested borderlands, which are themselves zones of exceptional governance because of their unresolved status. Across a wide range of international experiences, it has become clear that improving human security in these zones depends on policies that prioritise responsive and representative governance while also putting the human security of affected populations at the centre of security measures and attempts and conflict resolution. The usefulness of the human security concept lies in the fact that it shows why and how these efforts are directly linked to traditionally siloed issues such as socio-economic development and human rights protections. While it might seem that operationalizing such a broad and comprehensive concept in policy and strategy is an implausible goal, the ten principles for operationalizing human security in policymaking show that it is possible to redirect policy and strategy within traditionally siloed institutions towards new policy-making paradigms. Moreover, a range of legal and policy frameworks can be leveraged to put human security at the centre of national and borderland strategy. National Security Strategies can shift focus to include not just territorial defence but also the protection of local populations from violence and economic deprivation. Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Plans can target borderland communities, ensuring they receive essential services and economic opportunities. Human Rights Laws should protect marginalized groups, while Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution frameworks can prioritize dialogue and reconciliation. Disaster Risk Reduction and Refugee Policies should be tailored to the specific needs of borderlands, ensuring comprehensive human security in these fragile areas.

With a comprehensive strategy in place, international standards and indexes—such as the Global Peace Index (GPI), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and the OHCHR Human Rights Indicators among others—could be effectively utilized to measure human security in Georgia's contested borderlands of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While not without their difficulties, these tools offer a multi-dimensional approach to assessing the security environment, human rights conditions, and the overall well-being of the affected populations,

While international standards and indexes such as the GPI, ACLED, and OHCHR Human Rights Indicators can provide valuable insights into human security in Georgia's contested borderlands, there are significant challenges associated with using these tools in this specific context. One major challenge is the difficulty in obtaining reliable data from regions like South Ossetia and Abkhazia, where access is often severely restricted due to the ongoing conflict and political sensitivities. Information from these areas may be incomplete, biased, or influenced by the conflicting parties, leading to data gaps or inaccuracies that can distort the analysis. Additionally, these tools often rely on generalized indicators that may not fully capture the unique dynamics of

Georgia's borderlands, such as the complex inter-ethnic relations, historical grievances, and the influence of external actors like Russia. The application of these tools in Georgia also requires significant expertise and resources, which can be limited, particularly in remote and conflict-affected areas. Interpreting the data correctly is another challenge, as it must be contextualized within Georgia's specific political and cultural landscape to avoid misinformed decisions that could inadvertently escalate tensions. Despite these challenges, with careful use and the integration of local knowledge, these tools can still provide valuable guidance for measuring and enhancing human security in Georgia's contested border regions.

Together, these international standards and indexes offer a holistic view of human security in Georgia's contested borderlands. They enable policymakers, international organizations, and local actors to monitor the situation closely, identify emerging risks, and design targeted interventions that address both immediate security concerns and the longer-term need for human rights protection and social stability. This data-driven approach to human security is crucial for fostering peace and improving the lives of those living in these volatile regions.

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