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Human Rights or Life Rights: A case for a paradigm shift in ‘rights’ for sustainable environmental security

Sustainable environmental security is a pre-requisite for life. Only through the human security lens is it possible to approach the ‘rights’ discourse that is respectful of the environment.

Human Rights are granted to all humans at birth. Yet, the incessant focus only on human rights compromises sustainable environmental security. Any threat to the environment threatens all life in the planet, including the planet itself. This article argues that the discourse of rights should be extended to the natural world, expressly stating that all beings have a right to a healthy environment. The fate of environment and human are intimately linked and consequently (sustainable) environmental security must become a basic ‘life’ right.

Human security paradigm examines freedom from ‘fear’ and ‘want’ for individuals and ‘responsibility to protect’ for nations (UNDP 1994). Environmental security looks at threats from pollution, environmental degradation, resource depletion. Sustainability entails conservation of land and water, mitigation of natural hazards, reducing pollution, etc. Sustainable protection of the environment protects humans and therefore, it should be a vital aspect of any human security discourse.

The concept of sustainability developed out of the alarming reality that human activity has sparked off an inescapable process of destruction. Consequently making it clear that there are limits to human development on our planet.

What is lacking in current discourse on rights is a re-evaluation of the concept of human rights which takes on the issues of environmental security. If life on earth is in peril, then focusing only on human rights is futile. Only through sustained protection of the environment can human security, and through that, human rights, be protected.

This paper argues for a paradigm shift that takes into account the inescapable fact that rights should encompass human and all life on earth. Only through that can sustainable environmental security be achieved.