VENRO
ASSOCIATION OF GERMAN DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN AID NGOS

HUMAN SECURITY IS A SHARED INTEREST

Why Germany's National Security Strategy must take a comprehensive view on security

Germany faces fundamental decisions on security policy. War and violent conflict, the climate crisis, hunger and growing inequality, the erosion of international law and global health risks threaten people around the world. Many of these crises transcend national borders, also affecting Germany's security and stability.

The German government has established a National Security Council. This new body will bring together security assessments from across ministries and help prepare strategic decisions on security policy with a view to anticipating future risks. The government also plans to revise the first National Security Strategy, which was adopted in 2023. The revised strategy is expected to prioritise the growing military and hybrid threats.

This raises a fundamental question: What does the National Security Council understand by security – and how can security be sustained in the long-term?

The 2023 strategy closely linked defence capabilities, diplomacy and development cooperation, while emphasising the importance of prevention. Its concept of "Integrated Security" recognises that security encompasses far more than military defence and deterrence. This approach was reaffirmed in the 2025 coalition agreement. The new National Security Strategy must build on this understanding and further develop the concept. The war in Ukraine, hybrid attacks on critical infrastructure, threats to supply chains and large-scale efforts to influence public opinion in Germany – these are all real challenges. Yet an effective security policy must not be confined to defensive measures. Security is not just achieved solely through the ability to repel threats. It also depends on preventing crises, protecting livelihoods, strengthening social cohesion, upholding human rights and enforcing international rules.

VENRO, therefore, calls for human security to be enshrined as a guiding principle in both the National Security Strategy and the work of the National Security Council.

Human security broadens our perspective on security

Human security puts people and communities at the centre of security policy. It means "freedom from fear and want" and encompasses protection from violence, terrorism, human rights violations, discrimination and arbitrary persecution, as well as access to food, water, healthcare, education and natural resources. This approach recognises that people are affected by insecurity in different ways. Gender, age, disability, background and social circumstances all shape people's experiences.

Human security is not at odds with a state's ability to defend itself. Rather, it broadens our understanding of what creates security and what undermines it. Military deterrence can help prevent military attacks. But it cannot prevent droughts or famines, strengthen health systems, build trust in public institutions or halt the erosion of international rules. Precisely because Germany faces serious military and hybrid threats, it needs a comprehensive approach to security. The National Security Strategy, as well as sectoral and regional strategies, should be guided by one common principle:

prioritising prevention and civilian approaches wherever they can effectively help prevent or address crises.

Four areas deserve particular attention:

1. Prevention is security policy: why looking ahead costs less and achieves more

Security policy must act as early as possible. Preventing crises or limiting their impact saves lives, preserves political room for manouvre and can avoid high costs further down the line.

The economic implications are considerable. The Global Peace Index 2026 estimates the global economic impact of violence in 2025 at around USD 21.8 trillion – equivalent to 10.5 per cent of global economic output, or USD 2,657 per person.[1]

At the same time. research on disaster risk reduction shows that early action can prevent substantial follow-on costs. According to the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), investments in disaster risk reduction can, depending on the measure, avert response, reconstruction and wider economic costs many times greater than the initial investment. Every dollar invested in resilient infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries saves four dollars. Other studies estimate that every dollar invested can save between four and seven dollars in disaster response costs. Prevention therefore not only saves lives and protects development gains, it is also a matter of using public funds responsibly and efficiently.[1] The climate crisis makes this particularly clear. It destroys livelihoods, exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and can increase food insecurity, displacement and conflict risks. Its consequences - from droughts and heat-related deaths to disasters such as the floods in the Ahr Valley – are already being felt in Germany. The National Interdisciplinary Climate Risk Assessment (NiKE) identifies climate risks as one of the five greatest security risks, both for Germany and internationally.[2]

Climate mitigation and adaptation must therefore be integral to security planning. Climate-related risks and their impacts on vulnerable population groups should be systematically incorporated into strategic foresight and risk assessment.

The right to adequate food is a fundamental component of human security. The UN estimates that up to 520 million people could face hunger by 2030, with direct implications for global stability. Conflicts and geopolitical tensions cause crop failures and drive up food prices, including in Germany.

The same applies to global health. Pandemics and the spread of dangerous diseases, including the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, demonstrate how local health emergencies can develop into global crises. The effects of climate change, such as extreme heat, water scarcity and the spread of pathogens into new regions, further increase these risks. Strong health systems, primary healthcare and international cooperation are therefore essential components of prevention. A security policy that responds only once a crisis directly affects Germany is acting too late.

2. Resilient societies through cohesion and participation

Security depends not only on public institutions and infrastructure. It also depends on whether societies are able to take action in times of crises. Social cohesion, trust in institutions, effective social

[1] Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP):↘ Global Peace Index 2026.

[2] Metis Institute for Strategy and Foresight: ↘ Germany in the Climate Crisis.

protection systems, political and social participation, independent media and a diverse civil society all strengthen societies' ability to respond to crises. Polarisation, disinformation and declining trust undermine this capacity. Social resilience is particularly important in protracted crises and conflicts. Ukraine provides a striking example of how civic engagement can help communities withstand extreme pressure. Initiatives such as Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms, which ensure the provision of humanitarian assistance to people affected by the civil war, further demonstrate the vital importance of social resilience.

Resilience must therefore be understood as extending beyond the protection of critical infrastructure. Civil society organisations often reach people whom state institutions fail to reach adequately. They create spaces for participation, strengthen social structures and help address social tensions and conflicts. Their knowledge should therefore inform strategic foresight and the development of security policy options.

This also applies at the international level. Germany's security policy decisions can have far-reaching consequences for people and societies in partner countries. Their perspectives, as well as the expertise of local civil society organisations, must therefore be systematically taken into account.

3. Human rights and gender equality are essential to security

Human security and human rights go hand in hand. Security policy must therefore ask not only how states and infrastructure can be protected, but also whose security is being protected and who faces the greatest risks?

Crises, conflicts and disasters affect people differently. Armed conflicts in particular increase the risk of gender-based and sexual violence. Marginalised groups often face greater risks while having fewer ways to protect themselves or influence political decision-making. Gender equality and the Women, Peace and Security agenda are therefore integral to a comprehensive understanding of security.[3] Inclusive peace processes are more sustainable. At the same time, participation of women and marginalised groups is a matter of rights and meaningful political participation.

For Germany's National Security Strategy, this means that human rights and gender equality must not remain merely cross-cutting issues on paper or be treated as normative add-ons. They must be integrated into risk assessments, strategic foresight and political decision-making. This also requires systematically involving women, marginalised groups and their representative organisations in decision-making processes that affect them.

4. International rules are part of our security infrastructure

Germany cannot safeguard its security on its own. In a world of cross-border crises, Germany's security depends to a considerable extent on whether international rules are upheld, international institutions remain able to act and conflicts can be resolved peacefully.

The UN Charter, international law, including international humanitarian law, and international human rights treaties set limits on state action and the use of force. International institutions provide mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and enable cooperation on challenges that individual states cannot address on their own.

[3] UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions.

The rules-based international order is therefore not an abstract add-on to national security policy. It is part of the foundations of collective security. Its erosion often affects people in conflict-affected regions first: Civilians lose protection, humanitarian access becomes more difficult, violations of international law are less likely to have consequences. Over time, however, the weakening of the rules-based international order affects all states whose security depends on reliable rules, cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution.

For Germany, strengthening international law is therefore both a matter of values and of national interest. The German government should provide international institutions with stronger political and financial support, consistently speak out against violations of international law and shape international partnerships in ways that respect human rights and take into account the interests of affected communities. Lasting security can only be achieved through collective efforts.

Four priorities for the National Security Strategy

The revision of Germany's National Security Strategy offers an opportunity to link stronger military defence capabilities with a comprehensive understanding of human security. The National Security Council can help bring together perspectives across different ministries and identify risks at an earlier stage.

VENRO therefore calls on the German government to set four priorities revising the National Security Strategy and the work of the National Security Council:

1. Establish human security and prevention as guiding principles

The National Security Strategy should adopt a comprehensive definition of security. Protecting people and their livelihoods should be the benchmark for all security policy decisions. Risk assessments and political priority-setting must systematically incorporate civilian crisis prevention and peacebuilding, climate and food security risks, global health, human rights and social resilience. Prevention must be recognised as a distinct field of security policy.

2. Embed human security institutionally in the National Security Council

Joint risk assessments and strategic foresight must systematically consider non-military risks, the underlying causes of crises and the impact of political decisions on people and communities. This requires procedures across ministries and regular, structured dialogue with researchers, civil society organisations and other non-state actors. When decisions have implications for partner countries, local perspectives and civil society expertise must be taken into account.

3. Strengthen social resilience and the international order as pillars of security

The National Security Strategy should recognise strengthening international law and multilateral institutions as a security interest, alongside human rights, gender equality, social cohesion and an effective civil society. International partnerships should be measured against these principles. Security must not be achieved at the expense of the rights and security of other societies.

4. Provide adequate resources for civilian instruments

A comprehensive understanding of security must be reflected in the federal budget. The substantial expansion of defence capabilities must not go hand in hand with a structural weakening of the instruments that prevent crises and promote human security. Yet current budgetary developments

point in exactly this direction. A historic imbalance is looming. Under the government's draft 2027 federal budget and its medium-term financial planning until 2030, defence spending is set to increase sharply, while funding for development cooperation and the Federal Foreign Office is actually set to decline.

In 2027, the defence budget (section 14) is expected to be seven times the combined budgets of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (section 23) and the Federal Foreign Office (section 05). According to the medium-term financial plan, this ratio is projected to rise to 12:1 by 2030. [4]This growing imbalance runs counter to an integrated understanding of security.

Development cooperation, humanitarian assistance, civilian crisis prevention and peacebuilding, diplomacy, as well as international climate mitigation and adaptation all require reliable and adequate funding. Any government seeking to prevent crises must also invest in the instruments that address their root causes, strengthen social resilience and prevent escalation. The National Security Strategy must therefore do more than conceptually link military and civilian instruments. It must also make clear that integrated security requires an adequate resource base for civilian prevention and international cooperation.

Security is a shared endeavour

The key security risks of our time are interconnected. Wars destroy livelihoods and exacerbate hunger. The climate crisis deepens existing vulnerabilities and can increase the risk of conflict. Weak institutions and growing inequality fuel social tensions. The erosion of international law makes the peaceful resolution of conflicts more difficult. Crises that emerge elsewhere also affect Germany and the European Union, both directly and indirectly.

Germany must respond to military and hybrid threats and strengthen its defence capabilities. However, this must not lead to a narrow definition of security. A forward-looking security policy must recognise the interconnections between different security risks and take action before they escalate into full-blown crises.The revision of the National Security Strategy and the establishment of the National Security Council provide a crucial opportunity to do so.

Civilian instruments, strategic foresight and prevention must be preserved and expanded alongside stronger defence capabilities. Germany must once again assume greater responsibility for peace and human security. At a time of tight public budgets, this is no luxury, but a matter of foresight and sound economic judgement.

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[4] Sections 05 and 23 cover neither all civilian security-related expenditure nor the entirety of Germany's official development assistance (ODA). Nevertheless, they illustrate the growing imbalance.