Human security has in recent years evolved from a mere policy term used by states, international bodies and NGOs to a subject of scholarly reflection. The SCA research program - Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World (CONSEC) – addresses this development in its core research question:

“How is human security – understood as a situated, multilayered concept – used in social, cultural and discursive repertoires of individuals, communities, nations and states, in a globalizing world?”

Globalization has irrevocably altered our physical, political, institutional, moral, and legal landscapes. It is fair to say that it has shattered existing perceptions and realities of security, destabilizing notions and experiences of physical and spiritual security, certainty and certitude regarding livelihood, health, environment, war and terror, and cultural identities. In this situation, the perceived loss of security has become one of the key terms through which globalization’s discontents express themselves. National and global politics are increasingly framed in terms of the need to identify threats to, and restore, human security. State discourses proclaim a paternalistic ‘state of security’, while global policies, on the level of UN and UNESCO, are also increasingly motivated by the evolving Human Security paradigm. However, globalization does not simply imply experiences of rupture from earlier securities, but also entails an exponential multiplication of the pools of information resources and meanings from which people can draw to cope with their current local challenges. Next to a search for security, peoples’ decisions and actions include deliberate risk-taking, preparedness to engage in ‘unrest’, and decisions to step out of well-trodden routines. Alongside the struggles to protect family and kin, many hope to escape forms of community and security
that they experience as stifling or oppressive. The shifting sands of change push the oppressed to take disproportionate risks to put an end to their sense of injustice or exclusion.

Far from understanding human security as a never-withering, universal motive behind all human endeavors, the CONSEC program focuses on the dynamic relation between security and insecurity as it unfolds in our globalizing world. In this sense, a focus on human security (and by implication insecurity and risk) serves as an analytical tool that can help us highlight vital issues in our contemporary world, that are of much greater importance than only for scholars. Our program is actively engaged in tracing connections and contestations between various security discourses on the level of individuals, local communities, states and global policy networks. Attempting to critically reflect upon the place, status and contents of human security and insecurity in people’s perceptions and experiences, in national and global policy designs, and in scholarly research, our program is designed to develop critical models of analysis that are effective, transferable and practical for professionals in fields well beyond Social and Cultural Anthropology.

The program’s mission is threefold:

a) It explores the added value of human security as an analytical tool to enhance our understanding of the processes of identity formation, politics of in- and exclusion and violent clashes that characterize our contemporary world. It seeks to show that the anthropological study of such processes has much to gain from an analysis inspired by the notion of human security.

b) It seeks to make a substantial contribution to the evolving, yet still often quite limited and policy-oriented, multidisciplinary field of human security that tends to neglect the cultural and existential dimension. One of CONSEC’s key concerns is to illustrate how people’s ‘material needs’ are embedded in processes of cultural signification. This is not only important for scholarly debates, but also with regard to politics and policies, for instance with regard to the cultural dimension of violent conflicts and struggles about national identity in the Netherlands.
c) It operationalizes human security in broader terms, encompassing particular policy interventions associated with the ‘freedom from want’ (livelihood) and ‘freedom from fear’ (peace-keeping and post-conflict reconstruction) as well as the ‘existential’ dimension that refers to human attempts to make sense of this world and find a place in it, and to create some measure of certainty and predictability. Taking into account different agents’ own perceptions and constructions of human security, CONSEC moves beyond enumerating threats and dangers and calculating risks, and seeks to reveal the complex interactions between such conditions and people’s own -- often complex and contradictory -- perceptions and responses.

Much anthropological research is necessarily local in nature. Therein lies the power of human security as an analytical tool. The ubiquity of human security in current (international, political, developmental) discourses has increased the relevance of anthropology’s role, and entails an increasing reliance on anthropological paradigms in transnational interventions. Against the backdrop of the fluid ‘glocalizing’ and ‘transnationalizing’ environment, we seek to gain insights that are transferable between disciplines, as well as between scholars and policy makers. In this sense, the CONSEC program partakes in constructing our understanding of human security. In this endeavor, we engage in critical reflection on state-discourses promising human security (e.g. what fears does it exploit? What view on threats and safety does it highlight?); upon institutions’ marketing strategies “selling security”; upon the advocacy of ‘peace interventionism’, and the like. In so doing, we seek to demystify simple, one-dimensional, top-down images of human security, and to highlight that any image and goal revolving around human security is saturated with ambiguities, contradictions, risks and may well entail a no-win situation. At the same time, we use ethnographic methods in order to understand the struggles of especially the vulnerable and the subaltern to improve their living conditions – and to escape situations of threat and anxiety.