

Social and Cultural Anthropology: Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World (CONSEC)

Start programme: 2004

Programme leader: Prof.dr. Birgit Meyer (since 2007)

Vision, mission and objectives of the research programme

CONSEC, Constructing Human Security in a Globalizing World, focuses on the interaction between physical and existential aspects of human security, on the link between physical security and a sense of security (by 'notions of belonging'), as well as on the existing tension between security and freedom. In recent years, human security has evolved from a mere policy term used by states, international bodies and NGOs into a subject of scholarly reflection. The SCA research CONSEC addresses these developments in its core research question: 'How is human security – understood as a situated, multi-layered concept – used in social, cultural and discursive repertoires of individuals, communities, nations and states, in a globalizing world?' The mission of the programme is:

- 1) To explore the added value of human security as an analytical tool to enhance our understanding of the processes of sense making, identity formation, politics of inclusion and exclusion, development policies and violent clashes which characterize our contemporary world, and to show that the anthropological study of such processes can gain tremendously from an analysis inspired by the idea of human security.
- 2) To make a substantial contribution to the evolving, yet often still quite limited and policy-oriented, multi-disciplinary field of human security which tends to overlook the cultural and existential dimensions. One of the key aims of CONSEC is to illustrate how people's 'material needs' are embedded in processes of cultural signification. This is naturally important to scholarly debates, but it is also very relevant to politics and policies, for instance, with regard to the cultural dimension of violent conflicts and struggles about national identity in the Netherlands.
- 3) To operationalize 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 which 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. It seeks to reveal the complex interactions between such conditions and people's own – often complex and contradictory – perceptions and responses, paying particular attention to religion, development and global history.

Research area

The Department SCA research focuses on three themes. The first theme is religion, in line with the VU-profile and the choice of religion as one of the areas where the VU aims to excel. The research is embedded in the interdisciplinary research institute VISOR, where Meyer acts as a programme leader and as member of the management team. Sub-themes such as transnational religious movements in Christianity and Islam, the role of modern media in the transformation of religious traditions, the place of religion in the public domain, and new popular forms of religiosity, are mutually reinforcing. In this field important work on Pentecostalism and Heritage is done, not in the least because on both themes NWO and European funding was obtained. The second theme is development sociology. This theme is mirrored in studies on the functioning of development agencies and international relationships between organizations, but also in research on land rights, transnational migration, civil rights, democracy, and the environment. The third theme is historical anthropology, which builds on the previous chair non-Western history. This theme was developed in close collaboration with the Department of History (Faculty of Arts), in the form of a shared Chair of History and Anthropology and joint educational programmes. These three themes are held together by the conceptual focus offered by CONSEC, in which human security is not defined as a geographic or thematic research area, but as a conceptual lens.