

Research impact: making a difference

Exposing the impact of counter-terrorism on civil societies and aid

LSE research has drawn global attention to the tightening links between counter-terrorism, international development aid and civil society

What was the problem?

Since the 'war on terror' was launched in September 2001, the world has witnessed a burgeoning of extraordinary measures to combat terrorism.

While the human rights implications of these new measures drew criticism from lawyers and civil libertarians around the world, the impact of such measures on civil societies and international development received little attention.

Even before 9/11, researchers and development agencies had observed that governments and international organizations were using development aid to further their security policies. The War on Terror simply deepened and extended the process beyond countries in conflict to development policy and practice in general.

What did we do?

LSE researchers undertook an empirical research project between 2006 and 2010 aimed at investigating how governments and others had been able to use development as an instrument of security policy and documenting the effects of counter-terrorism measures on civil society and development policy and practice. They conducted case studies in three countries: Afghanistan, Kenya and India.

Leading the team was Professor of International Development Jude Howell, then Director of the LSE's Centre for Civil Society and of its ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Programme. The project's Research Officer from 2007 to 2009 was Dr Jeremy Lind, currently Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies.

Their research illuminated the complex, changing relationship between civil society, security and development since the 'war on terror' began, and illustrated the way in which governments had become adept at courting certain groups as co-adjutants in their security agenda while subjecting others to increasing surveillance, control and prohibition.

It also demonstrated the diversity of responses in terms of how organisations within civil society were responding to the new regulatory regimes, from passive compliance to active resistance. Of particular concern was the initial reluctance or indifference of many civil society organisations to respond or intervene when certain groups in society were branded as suspect, such as Muslim charities or international non-government organizations [NGOs] operating in the Middle East and other conflict areas. Such responses were viewed as a failure to exercise the behaviours of civil

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society normally expected in liberal democracies, such as supporting minorities and reining in the excesses of an over-reaching government.

What happened?

The project significantly contributed to understanding of how counter-terrorism measures affect civil societies and international development.

While many aid agencies were alert to the way aid was developing into a tool of security policies – and some Muslim organisations and human rights lawyers were speaking out against new government controls of civil society – much of the evidence was scattered and anecdotal. For the first time, the growing body of evidence was brought together and subjected to a coherent analytical framework that allowed for systematic comparisons.

Reaching out to non-academic audiences was a key element of the project from the outset. The methods used included workshops, roundtable discussions, public debates, policy briefs (on development aid, Afghanistan, Kenya, India and the Horn of Africa), practitioner fellowships, consultancy work, a dedicated War on Terror blog and extensive media coverage. Efforts were particularly targeted at the UK voluntary sector, international humanitarian and development organisations, policymakers in development and security fields, diplomatic staff, NGO staff, researchers and journalists in Afghanistan, Kenya, India, Lebanon and the USA.

In each of the fieldwork areas of Afghanistan, Kenya and India, the research had begun with an initial policy discussion bringing together all interested parties and ended with a feedback workshop. Local groups helped to organise these: Voluntary Action India Network (VANI) in India; the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief & Development (ACBAR) in Afghanistan; and in Kenya, first the Legal Resources Foundation Trust and later the Human Rights Commission.

In London, the research team developed close relationships with national and international organisations working in the field, organising joint workshops and round-table discussions and making formal presentations to them of the research findings. The organisations involved included the British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG); the international think tank Chatham House; the UK's National Council for Voluntary Organisations; and Médecins Sans Frontières.

Combined policy workshops and book launches took the public discussion of issues raised to Washington, New York, Nairobi, Delhi, Beirut and Balamand in Lebanon. For example, in Lebanon, an event organised with the dynamic Arab NGO Network for Development attracted over 40 participants from NGOs, human rights groups, development agencies, research centres, foundations and the British Ambassador. Two seminars at Lebanese universities further aired the issues, one at the American University of Beirut, the other at the University of Balamand in northern Lebanon.

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In addition to the advisory work conducted with aid agencies, the researchers were invited to a special briefing on Kenya at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in London for the incoming deputy High Commissioner and to a special roundtable on Afghanistan by the Canadian High Commission. They were also invited to join a special advisory group established by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), an umbrella body representing over 11,000 voluntary sector organisations in England, to prepare a shadow report on terrorism and charities.

A measure of the project's impact was the extensive coverage given to the research and its publications in the mainstream and NGO press of Kenya, India, the USA, the UK and Denmark. The researchers also gave interviews to Press TV, MSNBC and BBC Newsnight, and advised the BBC World Service on a programming season on the 10-year anniversary of the US Embassy bomb blasts in east Africa.

At the practitioner level, the ESRC Non-Governmental Public Action Programme funded two fellowships, which went to Elizabeth Winter of the British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) and Said Abdalla of the Kenyan Muslim Human Rights Organisation (KMHR). Both were then able to mine the research findings to the benefit of their organisations.

Follow-up consultancy work with organisations such as Christian Aid and Médecin Sans Frontières continued to focus attention on the impact of counter-terrorism on civil societies and acted as a catalyst for other initiatives.

For example, three groups who attended the project's international workshop in June 2007 spearheaded a new Washington-based Charity & Security Network, which began to systematically gather and share information on the rights of civil societies and contest potential threats. These groups were Cordaid, one of the largest development aid organisations in the Netherlands, and two Washington-based pressure groups: OMB Watch (now the Center for Effective Government) and Grantmakers without Borders.

As another example, the Kenyan research gave a platform to groups such as the Muslim Human Rights Forum and the Kenya Human Rights Commission, which organised conferences and roundtable discussions of their own on the tightening links between counter-terrorism, civil society and aid.

Funders

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