

National security concerns continue to dictate Britain's government aid and development agendas

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Historically the UK's foreign aid and national security interests have long tended to go hand in hand. But this trend has become much more marked since 9/11, with Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan now receiving aid in large amounts. [Professor Jude Howell](#) explores how the increasing securitization of aid under Britain's coalition government may come to undermine development goals in the future.



In August 2010, an internal paper from the Department for International Development (DFID) was leaked that pointed to a significant shift in Britain's aid policy. In particular it mooted the idea that development projects would be expected to make the 'maximum possible contribution' to British national security. This revelation caused outrage amongst many NGOs. Oxfam, Action Aid, Christian Aid, Save the Children Fund and Cafod responded swiftly, lodging their concerns about national security interests being put at the heart of aid policy in a [joint letter](#) to the Guardian newspaper.

This reaction was understandable but in some ways surprising –because the links between security and overseas aid have already converged considerably since the events of 9/11. Moreover, the 'securitising' of aid was already well underway from the late 1980s onwards in the context of the 'New Wars'. What is different from September 2001 onwards is that this securitisation of aid has extended beyond the niche of post-conflict countries to cover aid and development policy more broadly. By the securitisation of aid I mean the increasing absorption of global and national security interests into the framing, justification, design and implementation of aid and development policies.

What are the signs then of this deepening securitisation of aid? We can observe them in the statements of political leaders at the macro-level, in the documentation and institutional arrangements of development agencies at the meso-level, and in the operational programming at the micro-level.

At the macro-level, politicians and national leaders since 9/11 have made public statements linking poverty and alienation with terrorism, thereby connecting international development to national security goals. For example, in November 2004 in an interview for an ITV documentary, the then UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, spoke of poverty as a 'breeding ground for discontent'. Similarly then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair stated in a speech to the US Congress on 17 July 2003: "The threat comes because, in another part of the globe..., where a third of



A deepening securitisation of aid? © Prospect magazine

of our planet lives in poverty...and where a fanatical strain of religious extremism has arisen...and because in the combination of these afflictions, a new and deadly virus has emerged. That virus is terrorism".

These kinds of statements both by Britain's political leaders and by politicians in the USA and other Western countries have laid the ideological ground for a gradual shift in UK aid policy that has brought together protecting national and global security interests with the delivery of aid and development. Documentation this trend, in 2005, for example, the Department for International Development (DFID) released its strategy on [Fighting Poverty to Build a Safer World: A Strategy for Security and Development](#). In the foreword the then Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn, stated: "In recent years, DFID has begun to bring security into the heart of its thinking and practice. But we need to do more". While prioritising poverty

reduction, the strategy nevertheless underlines the need to make development and security goals 'mutually reinforcing', a desire which has in turn fed into policy formulation, institutional arrangements and programming.

Second, we note a substantial increase since 9/11 in the volume of aid to countries at the frontline of the war on terror, such as [Afghanistan](#), Iraq and more recently Pakistan. Indeed, this is a part of a broader shift in aid policy towards 'fragile' states, which are seen as particularly susceptible to manipulation by terrorist forces. Iraq became the top recipient of UK bilateral aid in 2003-2004, amounting to £209 million, thereby usurping India from its leading position the year before. In 2006 Afghanistan ranked among the top three recipients of UK bilateral aid at £134 million, rising from fourth position in 2005 at £121 million. Significantly neither Afghanistan nor Iraq were among the UK's top 20 recipients of net bilateral ODA before 2002. Indeed Iraq did not receive any bilateral aid before 2002. Thus the rising importance of Afghanistan and Iraq as recipients of UK overseas development aid reflects these linkages between development, security and foreign policy.

Third, the convergence of aid and security in aid practice is also reflected in the increasing co-operation between development, defence and foreign policy institutions, a pattern that has also characterised the development of US aid policy over the last decade. Like other countries, the UK has adopted a 'whole-of-government' approach to deal with the perceived terrorist threat. Some of the earliest institutions established to implement this approach were the Global and African Conflict and Prevention Pools, which were set up in 2001 to bring together the resources and expertise of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), DFID and the Ministry of Defence. These pools supported policing in Sierra Leone, disarmament programmes, and assistance to the African Union peace support operations in Darfur.

Another key 'joined-up' institution, set up in 2004, was the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit, which brought together DFID, the FCO and the Ministry of Defence. Influenced by the post-invasion instability in Iraq, the Unit shifted its focus away from immediate post-conflict development work towards providing assessment and operational expertise for stabilisation operations and was renamed the Stabilisation Unit in September 2007.

These meso-level manifestations of increased convergence between aid and security interests have also become translated at the operational micro-level into specific institutions, programme and projects. At the operational level the UK government has fostered closer civil-military co-operation in development and humanitarian assistance through the creation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT), primarily in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These changes have provoked considerable concerns amongst international and local NGOs involved in humanitarian and development work. Military engagement in humanitarian and development work for the purposes of 'hearts and minds' work has, from the perspective of NGOs, compromised their positions as declared independent and neutral actors, and contributed to a rise in attacks on humanitarian workers. There has also been enhanced investment in education in Muslim-majority countries as a strategy to counter the spread of radical political Islam. Part of this tactic has been aid to support the reform of curricula used in madrassas as well as an attempt to court moderate Muslim leaders in Muslim-majority countries.

Action Aid, Oxfam, Christian Aid and others were clearly right to lodge their concerns in *the Guardian* about the securitisation of aid. Putting national security interests at the heart of aid policy has considerable implications for development institutions, whether governmental or non-governmental, and for civil society actors. However, the securitisation of aid was well underway before the election of the new coalition government and has deepened with alacrity since 9/11.

If a further deepening and consolidation of the securitisation of aid goes ahead under the new coalition government, then development institutions should rightly be worried. The prime challenge this poses for bilateral development institutions is how they can maintain a focus on poverty reduction when under pressure from their governments to give greater priority to global and national security interests.

A longer version of [this article](#) first appeared on the LSE's [Global War on Terror blog](#) on 22 September. For further information on the securitisation of aid see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/GWOT.

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