

How the 9/11 decade changed the aid, security and development landscape



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‘Where development action went wrong in the last decade, it was often because it got caught up in hubristic over-ambition and conflicting objectives’

It’s hard to miss the various reflections on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in the mainstream media, or the journals aimed at the foreign policy and security communities (RUSI, 2011; Chatham House, 2011). Most of the more critical reflections focus not on the event itself, but on the western response – in particular, what Jason Burke calls ‘the 9/11 wars’ in Iraq and Afghanistan (Burke, 2011).

A recurring theme is that this decade has seen the last spasm of large-scale military deployments by western powers requiring the conquest, ‘stabilisation’ and reconstruction of foreign territory. This kind of intervention – the argument goes – can cause more problems than it solves, rarely delivers on its immediate objectives, tends to see the goalposts moving over time and is no longer affordable – particularly for the US in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Joseph Stiglitz has updated his calculations on the costs to the US of the Iraq war alone (Stiglitz, 2011) – which he describes as the only war in history fought entirely on credit – estimated at \$3-5 trillion, including the costs of care facilities for veterans, but excluding the incalculable social costs.

Development and aid professionals can see that the western countries’ response to 9/11 (and later attacks in London and Madrid) has had a profound impact on the way development agencies think and work. But it’s an uncomfortable subject, not least because it has involved growing links to security actors – with their different norms, timeframes and objectives – at policy and operational levels (Collinson et al., 2010).

Development and security concerns merged in a new lexicon that appeared soon after 9/11 (‘fragility’, ‘radicalisation’, ‘stabilisation’). This raised hopes for development approaches that might better combine action to assure the human security of poor people with orthodox social and economic development. It also, however, raised fears that the ‘securitisation’ of aid would undermine both development and humanitarian action.

A decade of change

The geo-politics of the 9/11 response influenced: where aid money is spent; where technical resources are deployed and why; the partners aid agencies work with and through;

and how development itself is understood and justified to the citizens of donor countries.

The UK, for example, has shifted allocations dramatically towards conflict-affected and fragile states over the last decade. The *Strategic Defence and Security Review* (HM Government, 2010) notes that the UK spent about a fifth of official development assistance (£1.9 billion) on supporting fragile and conflict affected states in 2010/11 – with an intention to move this up to 30% by 2014. Many multilateral agencies (most recently the World Bank) have committed to deploying more expertise and personnel on the ground in challenging environments. And many bilateral agencies have seen growing alignment between the ‘three Ds’ (defence, diplomacy and development) in policy discourse and on the ground, as is illustrated in the UK’s recent cross-governmental *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*.

These changes are not knee-jerk automatic responses – they have evolved alongside changing perceptions of development in the new environment, with the most profound changes seen in how development action is understood and justified. The optic of fragility has softened since its post 9/11 heyday, from an initial focus on national units – and on state structures. Recent years have seen a subtle shift in the use of the metaphor, with a strong focus on sub-national contexts, and societies as well as states.

A decade of lessons

Where development action went wrong in the last decade, it was often because it got caught up in hubristic over-ambition and conflicting objectives. One common lesson cited in the humanitarian, development and security literatures is that the project of ‘stabilisation’ in post-conflict situations has often been over-complex, lacking convincing models of how change will occur, and beset by unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved over what time frame.

But there have been positive lessons that have become more mainstream in development practice, notably:

- The need to understand context and the complexity of relationships, interests, perceptions and incentives in conflict situations (although ability to do this effectively does

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not follow on automatically from recognising the issue) (Elhawary et al., 2010).

- The importance of sustainable governance transitions as a basis for development following fracture and conflict. Political arrangements need to be inclusive and durable enough to allow progress, with political settlements looking beyond ‘elite pacts’ to encompass the building of sustainable citizen/state relations.
- That the world is less certain than our pre-9/11 models suggested (in contrast to a mental model of ‘MDG world’ – where there is linear and predictable progress towards defined outcomes on the basis of a given set of inputs).
- That getting markets moving (through small, local enterprises) is critical to build social cohesion and sustainable development.
- That tackling persistent and chronic inequalities between social groups (including gender inequality) really matters for social cohesion and long-term sustainable development.
- That tackling transnational threats to development through illegal trafficking is a high priority for sustainable development, as outlined in the *World Development Report 2011 on Conflict Security and Development* (World Bank, 2011).

Looking ahead

Recognising the importance of ‘security’ in development (in a broad sense and with a focus on freedom from violence for poor people) has been a progressive and important change in the way that we work. Analytical work has convincingly shown that poverty reduction is hugely impeded by conflict and violence. And many agencies have implemented this focus seriously – with the UK, for example, establishing a programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo (where it has no obvious great strategic interest) as well as scaling up in Pakistan (where it does).

But the forward agenda also needs to take account of the other big theme of this week’s various 9/11 retrospectives. This is that the emphasis on reacting to the terrorist threat distracted western countries (particularly the US) from responding strategically to a far more significant long-term

change – the shifting balance of global economic power towards large middle-income countries, particularly China and India (Garton Ash, 2011). As of now the focus in the mainstream literature is on the economic strength of these countries. But the security and development footprint of the emerging powers of Asia, Africa and Latin America will grow. This will surely change how we see the interaction between the spheres of development and security over time and it will influence norms and agendas in both areas. And in relation to the Islamic world – the obsession with an optic based on counter-terrorism distracted many in the west from understanding the real changes taking place on the ground, which have recently found expression in the dramatic social and political changes taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

For the years to come, therefore, we can expect to see an end to large ‘boots-on-the-ground’ western interventions. Hopefully crude, over-ambitious and poorly informed ‘post-invasion’ stabilisation initiatives are unlikely to be repeated. We should also expect to see the practice of development in a state of rapid transformation as it comes to terms with new realities – emerging world powers which contain much of the world’s poorest people, changing patterns of influence globally, and a declining emphasis on public resource flows from rich to poor countries as the central driver of development progress. Conceptually, our concern with uncertainty and risk is increasingly finding expression through the notion of building ‘resilience’ as a goal of development action. The literature on resilience emerges from different traditions (encompassing concerns with disaster risk reduction, conflict, humanitarian action, climate change, social protection, market volatility etc.) and gives us the opportunity to make useful links between these different issues.

In the midst of all of this change we should retain a key lesson from the last decade – that freedom from violence matters enormously for poor people, and that realising basic human security for all should remain a key goal for development action.

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References and useful resources

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Useful resources:

- ODI’s Humanitarian Policy Group: <http://bit.ly/odi-hpg>
- ODI’s Politics and Governance programme: <http://bit.ly/odi-pogo>
- ODI’s work on stabilisation, development and humanitarian action: <http://bit.ly/stabilisation-development-humanitarian-action>