Reclaiming security to meet poor people's needs

Poor people want to feel safe, just like anyone else. Whether in the midst of endemic violence, such as in Afghanistan or Somalia, or in more stable countries (where the police and judicial services may still be inadequate, unfair, or abusive) security and access to justice should be development goals in their own right.

Although we often recognise this through our experience on the ground, as a sector, we in the development community have yet to fully engage with our potential to help address poor people's genuine security and justice needs.

Whose security?

Security is a small word with big implications. There is sometimes an assumption that security refers primarily to states or regimes. However, various alternative approaches (perhaps most famously 'human security') take the security of individuals and communities as starting points.

Focusing on the security of individuals and communities has widened the idea of security beyond physical safety and 'freedom from fear' to also encompass other important aspects needed to 'secure' human wellbeing – such as political empowerment or 'freedom from want' (having access to health and education, for instance).

However, 'state' and 'human' security are not mutually exclusive. The human security of vulnerable individuals and communities relies, at least in part, on a functioning and responsive state, which itself needs security. What we need is an 'inclusive' approach to security that recognises the needs of both states and communities and, for us in the development community, the real challenge is in ensuring that the needs of poor people are met throughout.

Reclaiming security for development

Communities must be given the opportunity to define their own vision of security. In some places it may mean ending violent attacks and rape. But in others it could mean livestock being safe from theft, the monsoon not washing away crops, or not being unfairly exploited in commercial transactions.

Development actors can help in a number of ways – supporting communities to identify their security concerns and develop appropriate solutions, holding security and justice services to account, and engaging in dialogue with national governments and international donors about how to meet the security needs of both people and the state.

But this kind of 'developmental' approach to security and justice is far from assured, and the subject is a live one for governments in both developing and donor countries. Far from seeing security as an imposition into the development agenda, we in the development community must claim our central role in promoting poor people's security and access to justice.

We need a sophisticated and 'joined up' conversation about aid, development and security – and how we can translate this into effective, equally coherent programming. Based on our own experience working to promote security and access to justice in a range of 'conflict-affected and fragile' countries, Saferworld believes the following points might provide a useful starting point for such a discussion.

1. Poor people are entitled to security and access to justice just as they are to health, education and other basic services.
2. 'Security' and 'justice' are indivisible: we can't have one without the other.
3. An inclusive approach to security is based on the needs of people and the state …
4. … but people should always be at the heart of security and justice: reforms must be locally-owned and involve the meaningful participation of those they affect, be informed by a good understanding of realities on the ground, and always promote accountability and transparency.
5. Context is key: what 'security and justice institutions' look like in some societies may be very different in others.
6. Helping to meet poor people's security and justice needs will need coherent development, defence and diplomatic policy from international actors – but this shouldn't mean subsuming development policy into other objectives.

The role of civil society

Because we haven't yet taken principles of 'security and justice' as seriously as we might, work on these issues has largely gone on without civil society and the development community. When we have developed a strong and coherent vision of how best to meet poor people's security and justice needs, we need to advocate for national governments and international donors to take such an approach. And even where policy on promoting security and justice is good, the right implementation partners will be critical if it is to mean anything in practice.

Partly because civil society has so far had only limited engagement in this area, the majority of development money currently directed towards security and justice work is spent through private sector consortia. Such consortia are often good at delivering the 'supply' side of security and justice reforms (such as providing police training or building courthouses). However, civil society has a range of skills and expertise – particularly around crucial areas such as community engagement, participatory approaches and civil society capacity-building – that will be crucial for empowering poor and vulnerable populations to effectively demand the services they really want and hold their governments to account for delivering them.

Ultimately, if civil society is absent from the debate on 'security and justice', policy development and programming will not stop, but the voice of some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable people does risk being absent.

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