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Social harm and crime at a global level

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Editorial

We all have commonsense ideas about what crime is. Splashed on the front pages of newspapers and a daily staple of TV, literary and film entertainment – crime stories are big news and big business. Murder, theft and assault might be some of the first things that to come to mind when posing the question 'what is crime?'.

Predominantly it is the most visible and obvious crimes that receive the most attention. Get behind the front pages and the headline statistics, and the picture becomes much more complex. Harms and injustices which occur across the population, resulting in serious and even deadly consequences, seem to gain comparatively less interest and many do not come with the locus of criminal justice.

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies' *What is crime?* project seeks to shed light on hidden or ignored harms and crimes, and stimulate discussion and debate about why some 'crimes' and not others are deemed worthy of policy, media and political concern. *What is crime?* explores a variety of harms caused in different areas of modern life – for example, violent events produced by the contemporary economic system, death and injury caused by businesses and the life threatening effects of pollution.

Poverty kills, yet rarely seems to provoke the political and public outrage that conventional 'crime' often does. In this *What is crime?* briefing *Social harm and crime at a global level* we publish an edited transcript of a lecture given by Dr David Roberts at King's College London in April 2009. In the lecture he discussed the *What is crime?* theme from the perspective of international relations focussing on the specific problem in the developing world of child mortality and the link with the limited supply of clean drinking water and sanitation. He asks the question why is it that much of international relations policy focuses on terrorism and civil war while the real threat to human security is the lack of clean water? He then goes on to suggest a scheme whereby this problem might be addressed within current social and economic structures.

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This briefing paper aims to connect the idea of social harm with that of human security at the global level. It does so by looking at practical solutions to reducing child mortality worldwide.

It is important to explain how the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies (CCJS) regards social harm in this context. The concern is that nation states tend to emphasise criminal harms above other kinds of harms. This means that governments or states prioritise crimes such as knife attacks, murders, shootings, rapes and muggings – that is, crimes that involve direct violence. Priority is given to issues which members of the public are confronted with in the media on a daily basis. The result is that a broader range of harms that impact on a greater number of people are neglected.

The United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) recently pointed out that Britain has the highest rate of child poverty in the whole of Europe. Yet child poverty is not a priority in UK government policy, while issues like muggings and shootings are. Even though child poverty and maternal mortality impact on huge numbers of people in the UK, government policy prioritises responses to problems that impact on only a few people directly. This doesn't simply apply to the UK; it applies across much of Europe.

Other kinds of harms that that are not prioritised by governments include corporate and state raiding of pension funds. The present Prime Minister Gordon Brown and many private companies are famed for having financially undermined pension funds in Britain. The damage to a huge number of people as a result is almost inconceivable, yet it is not prioritised. Knife crime affects only a handful of people, but it has been placed front and centre in terms of government interventions.

What we call these issues is part of the problem. In other words, wider harms such as the neglect of pensions, issues affecting single parents and significant social problems are not prioritised simply because they are not referred to as 'crimes'. The social harm approach is concerned with viewing these broader harms as seriously as 'narrow crimes'. This is not to say that one should forget about 'narrow crimes' or acts of direct violence such as murders, shootings, rapes and muggings. It is to say that we should also consider the socio-economic impact of neo-liberalism on a great number of people in a so-called mature democracy, where we also happen to have the highest rates of child poverty in Europe. As a result, there is a tension between what liberal democracy says it will do and the outcomes of the economic policies associated with these political choices.

Global organisations

In a similar vein, states like Britain and international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) tend to prioritise harms in terms of conventional security such as terrorism, nuclear weaponry and civil war. Addressing these harms is at the very top of policy-making agendas for nations around the world. But what this does is to neglect the wider social harms that impact on a far greater number of people in the world. In fact, the wider social harms that are being neglected are killing millions more people than the crimes being focused on by governments. The current prioritising by states of security issues neglects problems such as lack of water and sanitation, infectious diseases and extremes of poverty. Actually, these matters are matters of human security.

This difference between what states prioritise and what people suffer is illustrated in Figure 1. In four years, numbers of deaths globally from terrorism

FIGURE 1. COMPARING AVOIDABLE MORTALITY

Year	Deaths from terrorism	Deaths of soldiers and civillians in combat	Deaths from Measles	Deaths from Malaria	Deaths from Diarrhoea	Communicable disease
2002	970	21,405	611,000	1,272,000	1,798,000	14,866,870
2003	470	47,351	530,000	1,000,000	1,788,500	N/A
2004	732	41,586	454,000	1,000,000	1,820,007	N/A
2005	550	31,013	345,000	1,000,000	N/A	14,018,871
Total	**2,722**	**141,355**	**1,940,000**	**4,272,000**	**5,406,507**	**28,885,741**

totalled 2,722, while 141,000 soldiers and civilians died in combat. The difference is significant. Compare this, however, with the number of deaths from diarrhoea – an equally, perhaps even more preventable problem – at 5,406,000. Nearly 29 million people die from communicable diseases compared to the 141,000 who die in combat. And yet terrorism and war are prioritised in terms of what states concentrate their resources on. This not only applies to individual states, but also to international organisations such as NATO, the IMF and the World Bank.

The concern then is with a very narrow understanding of what security is. This is what brings academics and policy makers to the concept of human security. The human security concept at the global level mirrors the social harm approach at the national level. It is concerned with placing human beings front and centre in the security debate, rather than Trident submarines, nuclear weapons, aircraft carriers and the so-called 'war on terror'. It is concerned with threats to the security of the human being rather than threats to the way the state defines our security needs (such as threats to its territorial integrity), since more people are threatened by lack of water and exposure to various types of influenza than they are by other states or terrorists.

It is difficult to agree on what this notion of human security should be, how wide it should focus, how broad it should be. The idea that we should put issues like children and non-combatants first is at risk of being lost because, so far, the concept of 'human security' has been resisted by those able to determine what takes front and centre position in state policy making.

Child mortality

This can be illustrated by looking at a specific issue such as child mortality. Child mortality is not like politics; it is objective. It can be medically, scientifically, irrefutably counted and categorised. At the same time, medical science not only tells us what the child died of, it provides a social pathology of cause. That is, it tracks the route the child takes to its death, and in following this route we can identify the deeper political causes and therefore the policies we need to reconsider. Child mortality is epidemiologically ascertainable; there are clear figures about how many children are dying and why.

According to leading journals such as the *British Medical Journal*, *The Lancet* and the *American Journal of Medicine and Psychiatry*, roughly 66 per cent of the 10 million children who die every year do not have to die. In other words, 6.6 million children die every year unnecessarily from clearly preventable problems. Most of them die from water-related illnesses such as campylobacter, giardia and salmonella. These causes of death are relegated, however, behind terrorism, civil war and nuclear threats, from which, comparatively speaking, almost nobody ever dies. Because we know exactly what causes these children to die, we are also in a position to know how we can prevent these deaths. The solutions lie fundamentally in water and sanitation. Put very briefly and very simply, it is a case of 'clean water in, dirty water out'.

Attempts are being made to try to supply water to populations in developing countries. However, these attempts mainly involve a top-down approach. Current initiatives often combine multinational companies, such as Thames Water or its French equivalent EDF, sometimes supported by the World Bank, which help to develop funding for contract bidding and provisions for developing a water infrastructure, with the intention of creating a profit for the transnational corporations. This type of top-down, market-based commercial approach tends to ignore low-income areas. Where people have no money, they are unable to buy goods: it's a very simple equation. But it has proved very difficult to get an answer to the question of how people with no money can pay for privatised water from the institutions that favour this approach.

The price of water

Mass water provision currently tends to ignore areas beyond the metropolis because the kind of infrastructure needed to carry large quantities of water to large numbers of people is very expensive and does not provide a good income return, if any, to a transnational corporation. In addition, there is no ongoing inward investment through water provision because the multinational corporations are known to export the high profits, which are made from providing water to the metropolitan cities, out of the countries they are assisting. According to Hall and Lobina (2006), two of the leading specialists on privatised water supplies, the cost of water in developing countries' capital cities is six times greater than what people pay for bottled water in London. The price of water in these

cities is therefore way beyond what we would normally set at market levels. So, while neo-liberalism is presented as part of the solution, it charges excessive prices in cities and ignores mass need beyond urban areas. Furthermore, large water companies feel that, because of the huge costs of submitting tenders and the risks they run from heavy investment, public money should be made available to subsidise these costs. At the other end of the scale, smaller charity organisations struggle with minimal resources to provide even the most basic resources – successfully in many cases, but with little impact on the scale of the need.

In contrast, a human security approach might involve a system whereby water provision is supplied by externally funded local entrepreneurship instead of through a top-down approach run by the World Bank and multinational corporations. Many argue against this form of development on the basis that local capacity is not capable of providing a water supply. It is, however, not local capacity that is absent, but basic equipment such as spades, concrete, diggers, trucks, roads and direct access to water. It is worth remembering that water is an essential part of staying alive; people settle as close to where it is accessible as possible. Thus, the idea is that, instead of the World Bank leading from the top down to multinations, there should be multilateral donor support for local entrepreneurialism. In other words, communities that don't have water and can't create sanitary systems would be lent money through the World Bank or other donor organisations such as the UN and UNICEF. Through this loan, communities could engineer from their own local knowledge and experience adequate water and sanitary systems. The poorest people in these areas would not pay in this system because the cost of the water would be subsidised.

Making it happen

The first objective would be to make states that normally prioritise nuclear weapons, submarines and the other instruments of national security mentioned earlier prioritise children. Although it may seem a little far-fetched, certain outcomes can be arrived at simply by this clear change in focus. States can be forced to pay attention to particular issues through what are called 'norms entrepreneurs'. A norms entrepreneur is someone who starts something new. In this instance the idea could be elevated by organisations such as 'Not On Our Watch', for example. Not On Our Watch is a NGO comprising actors, and is run by well-known celebrities such as George Clooney and Brad Pitt who take a keen interest in issues related to global development, issues which may centre around morality or primacy. In short, these organisations are platforms from which to launch new ideas of any kind. They may be supported by a wide range of social and voluntary organisations with expertise in water provision, including WaterAid and Oxfam amongst many others.

The key policies and preferences of states can also be challenged by members of the general public. States have to pay attention to what is being said to them. They do not have to respond, but when the media gets hold of an issue that is engaging the public and high-profile individuals, they need to pay attention. My hypothesis is that once states are told that they must prioritise children, they, in turn, force the World Bank to say 'children first'. How do they do that? The World Bank is not an autonomous organisation floating in international space, as some people think. It is like any large business organisation, run by a board of governors and comprising panel members from the nation states. In other words, there is a board of executives, but that board of executives is under the control of the states in an international system. This means that once, for example, Britain, France, Denmark or Switzerland are persuaded that a change is wanted at the World Bank, providing enough states agree, the bank has to stop its current practices and change its policies.

Global water bank

Such an approach would shift the emphasis away from privileging and financing multinational companies towards providing a global water bank. It is often the case that if people want to create a water supply from a well or river, their capacity to do so doesn't relate to their knowledge; it relates to their need for basic technical equipment such as diggers or concrete mixers. A global water bank would be connected to other

provinces, regions and neighbouring countries that might be better positioned to provide such technical support. It is the case that most people in communities affected by access to water problems know how to access water but are disconnected from the ability to do so. A global water bank would facilitate access.

Instead of multinationals coming in and setting out their plans to lay pipes in limited (that is, profitable) areas and to provide water at a high cost, provision would be determined by community needs expressed through community-based organisations. Communities with water access problems and high rates of child mortality would determine what was needed, not the donors. This would be a participatory bottom-up kind of approach. The water bank would provide particular services to these communities. Communities would then be connected to water through the ability of a global water bank to take money from donors such as the British government, UNICEF or the World Bank (avoiding the duplication that normally goes with this) to give money and technical expertise to local people and facilitating regional contacts. Connect this programme to NGOs like Oxfam and WaterAid, which are powerful mobilisers of public opinion and influential in state decision-making circles. Apply strong pressure on national executives in developing countries and those most influential in, for example, the World Bank. The World Bank would then be forced to facilitate and/or fund the global water bank in communities with the highest rates of under-five mortality.

The water bank would provide cash credits, technical expertise and education – education is essential when it comes to sanitation. Children need to be educated at a very basic level. They need to learn to wash their hands after they've been to the toilet. They need to learn not to go into trenches that are filled with human waste, and not to play in them. Basically, they have to learn the things that children outside these areas take for granted. Education is the first step to achieve this.

Also important, in terms of democracy and accountability, is some kind of evaluation of these projects. Again, according to Hall and Lobina (2006), this is remarkably easy to achieve because recording changes in child mortality rates would quickly demonstrate the effectiveness of a water bank programme. And, according to medical epidemiology, these changes take place virtually overnight. The cleaning of water intake and the removal of filthy waste would have an almost immediate impact on the number of children who die before the age of five. Hall and Lobina (ibid) claim that all these changes would be remarkably easy to achieve, mostly because there are only 24 countries that need to be prioritised. This is not a serious problem across the world; it mainly affects states in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Prioritising policy in those particular countries would rapidly reduce child mortality rates.

How likely is this kind of change in the international system?

First, change in the international system is more likely to take place if the change is not radical. Rather than saying, well, the way to reduce child mortality is to go to Mars, understanding that the solution is relatively easy and technically based means that such a policy is more likely to be adopted. Second, the proposal has to be clear and specific, and the language used not vague or ambiguous. Third, an indicator of likely success is that when the aims of a project are intrinsically good the project is more likely to succeed. Very few people would say that reducing child mortality is a bad idea, so it falls into this 'intrinsically good' type of argument. Research also suggests that change is more likely if the proposal will result in reducing the bodily harm of innocent people (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Children fall into that category; death through diarrhoea could be said to be extreme violence against the individual. There also needs to be a short and clear causal chain rather than a complicated process which is hard to determine and describe. 'Dirty water in, clean water out' changes the process. In addition, a state is more likely to advance a new cause, or norm, if it perceives that it will benefit from it in terms of its status amongst its global peers.

In conclusion

The water bank project doesn't require a substantial departure from convention. Neo-liberalism can be adapted and co-opted in reducing the rates of child mortality. This is not a major departure from predominant norms. It impacts on child mortality quickly and measurably. It is merit-worthy and unambiguous. The benefits radically outweigh the cost. In fact, the economic cost of such a project will reduce fairly quickly over time. The amount of money that needs to be spent on such a project is much

References

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less than that invested by the private sector in water infrastructure for profit over several decades.

One of the greatest virtues of this idea is that it relies on ordinary members of the public. It involves ordinary voters in western democracies doing ordinary things because it is now normal for us to contact our governments. Twenty years ago it would have been unusual for members of the public to have a discussion with a MP or to watch something on YouTube and respond to it through setting up a discussion forum or another way of engaging with others. In today's western society, this is quite ordinary. However, it would be a quite extraordinary outcome if child mortality rates were to drop quickly and suddenly with such a relatively small change. And that is where the water and sanitation idea presented here connects back to the reduction in social harm as widely understood, a case of ordinary people doing ordinary things for an extraordinary outcome: a real chance for real change almost for free, for millions of the most vulnerable infants in the world.

Dr David Roberts is senior lecturer in politics at the University of Ulster and convenor and Chair of the Human Security Working Group, affiliated with the British International Studies Association.

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