The impact of overseas conflict on UK communities

Researchers and policy-makers have limited understanding of how conflicts overseas affect UK communities, aside from when substantial flows of asylum seekers and migrants from conflict regions occur. Yet globalisation has intensified and changed UK communities' international connections. This research studies the impact on UK communities of three areas of conflict: Afghanistan/Pakistan, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and the Western Balkans.

Key points

- Overseas conflicts impacted differently on different types of communities: ethno-national communities, local communities, communities of choice, and communities of practice.

- Communities were particularly affected if there was strong UK involvement in overseas conflicts. Where government involvement was limited, impacts were more restricted to those with direct links to the locations of those conflicts.

- Individuals directly affected were mostly from ethno-national communities with links to the conflict region, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, but also settled ethno-national communities and the local communities in which they lived.

- Overseas conflicts impacted directly on active or former soldiers, their families and local communities.

- Mainstream UK media coverage of conflicts affected the identity politics of ethno-national communities.

- New communication technologies (websites, forums, blogs, email) allowed easy connection with conflict regions. This enabled groups who formerly had difficulties in accessing international media sources (some women, British-raised youth from ethno-national communities) to develop more informed political opinions, and provided alternative news sources for those who rejected mainstream media characterisation of conflicts.

- Affected communities challenged UK public perceptions of overseas conflicts and turned to or established alternative media sources.

- Campaigns around conflicts led to the formation of 'communities of choice' for particular political positions and responses to policy.

- 'Communities of practice' were created as a response to conflicts overseas, as practitioners began to network about particular concerns.

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

www.jrf.org.uk

Background

Conflicts overseas have had a significant impact on communities in the UK for centuries, but two significant, recent changes have increased the extent and changed the nature of these impacts. First, new communication technologies have allowed a more rapid, wider diffusion of information about those conflicts to communities across the UK. Second, the 'super-diversity' of the UK means that virtually all conflicts occurring around the world will have a direct impact on some long-term UK residents from the conflict region. In certain cases, much larger groups of people may also be mobilised by conflicts overseas, typically where the UK is directly involved in a military or diplomatic capacity. 'Communities of practice', comprising professionals and practitioners working with local communities affected by overseas conflicts, may also be drawn in and develop responses to the conflicts.

This study examined the impact of overseas conflict on communities in the UK, using documentary research, interviews and case studies of communities associated with three conflict areas: Afghanistan/Pakistan, the Great Lakes region of Africa – Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and Uganda – and the Western Balkans.

Impacts on different types of communities

'Community' is a malleable term central to public policy. Research participants who were engaged in public policy typically began interviews by connecting conflict with refugee communities. A local authority community worker from Hounslow commented that:

> [T]here was an issue, in the first or second wave of migrants arriving and newly emerging communities. There was [a realisation] that we need to step up to help this particular community because they are struggling from strife and conflict.

Yet she was clear that the needs of refugee communities should be balanced against how community is understood in other ways:

> But that's always said against the backdrop of our current local residents … We will step up a notch to help those who are coming in from the war-torn areas. But ... we want to embrace them into becoming Hounslow community, and then help them to prosper and move on. (Woman, local authority community worker, Hounslow)

This highlights the distinction between local communities in the UK and ethno-national communities tracing their heritage to conflict regions. Respondents also clarified that overseas conflicts impact on both of these communities, but they had a more positive vision of an idealised process of integration through which they will eventually blend into each other.

Impact of British diplomacy or military action overseas

One of the most significant factors influencing the impact of overseas conflict on communities in the UK is the extent of official UK involvement in the conflict area, and the particular position the UK is seen to take in the conflict. Examples include supporting the incumbent government (Afghanistan, Rwanda), encouraging dialogue among all parties (DRC in the 1990s/early 2000s), and supporting civil society only (e.g. Burma). Where UK involvement is limited, direct impacts tend to be restricted to those on refugees and migrants from the conflict area. There have been exceptions, such as the significant numbers of people from very diverse origins who protested in London against the Israeli bombing of Gaza in 2008. This was unusual, however. A more common example was the 2009 protests in London against the Sri Lankan army's bombardment of Tamil areas of Sri Lanka. These protests were attended almost exclusively by people of Tamil origin, who were openly critical of the lack of broader engagement from the UK population.

The most widespread impacts of the three conflicts studied in this research were those relating to Afghanistan/Pakistan, where the UK is engaged in military action. The conflict has produced large flows of asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, including large numbers of unaccompanied children. It has also drawn in members of settled Pakistani communities in the UK, who had a sense of insecurity about travelling to Pakistan and felt profiled as a suspect community in the UK. The conflict has drawn in the armed forces community too, particularly through the charity 'Help for Heroes', in challenging public perceptions of soldiers and raising money for the families of

soldiers injured or killed. In addition, the conflict has impacted on the local communities in which Afghans, Pakistanis and members of the armed forces live in the UK.

Impacts on and beyond ethno-national communities

The impacts of conflicts with less direct connections to the UK were focused much more on individuals with direct links to the locations of those conflicts. The sub-project on the Western Balkans focused on workplaces in London as an example of a particular local community. The 'super-diversity' of the UK, particularly in London, has further complicated this situation. Encounters between individuals from warring sides of conflicts overseas are inevitable, but this was frequently reported as a positive opportunity, even when some tension was present.

> I am a barber … There are six of us who work in our shop, mainly Greek Cypriots and North Africans … My clients are from all communities you can imagine living in London, including regular Serbian clients … There, I have an obligation to accept and respect everyone… (Kosovar Albanian man, in his 50s)

The nature of super-diversity in the UK inevitably resulted in other exchanges between diverse ethno-national communities in the context of particular local communities. In some cases this resulted from clear policy decisions to try to bring people together in a 'civil society'. For example, the director of a Congolese community association explained that they consciously focused on serving the 'French-speaking African community' rather than a narrowly defined DRC community:

> [T]he door is open to everybody, Rwandese, Congolese, Hutu, Tutsi because we all came over here to seek asylum for reasons of persecution. We need to set an example, we need to teach them that once we are in England you need to learn to live with each other … It is very important for the leaders to understand that we need to be one. If we are not one here not only the British society will not accept us, but we are not going to be able to rebuild our own country when we go back home.

Impact of mainstream media

Media coverage of particular conflicts has impacted on the identity politics of communities in the UK. For example, people from Serbia or of Serbian origin form one of the largest established ethno-national communities from the Balkans in the UK. Those interviewed for this research resented the stereotypical image of Serbians as nationalist instigators of conflict, which they thought the mainstream media presented. In response, some preferred not to identify themselves as Serbian in public contexts. Others rejected this characterisation and found ways to ensure that the British public was better informed; for example, one group had initiated the opening of a Serbian section in Fulham library, which provides information about Serbian history, culture and society. Similarly, it was clear that young people of Pakistani origin were increasingly self-identifying as Muslim; this was linked to media presentations of Muslims as a 'suspect community' and their embittered response to conflicts in Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iraq.

The role of information and communication technologies

New technologies provided an alternative source of news for those who rejected the characterisation of particular conflicts in mainstream media. Satellite television and the internet allowed easy access to news sources directly from areas of conflict, including television stations, websites of established newspapers and new, specific blogs.

Such easy access has enabled groups who would traditionally not have had access to news sources from conflict areas to develop more informed political opinions. This included women (since until relatively recently access might usually be restricted to a satellite channel showing in a community café, which women would typically not visit), and British-raised youth from ethno-national communities (for similar reasons).

In most cases these new media are in community languages. This meets the information needs of migrants from those conflict areas, although their children and grandchildren may not master the languages sufficiently to follow news broadcasts. In other cases, respondents were just as suspicious of these sources as they were of perceived UK media bias. Alternatively, individuals themselves may establish new websites in English, although these typically provide information to groups who are already interested and so are less useful in convincing a wider public.

Political mobilisation around overseas conflicts

Campaigns around conflicts have led to the formation of 'communities of choice' related to particular political positions and responses to policy. In some cases these have been coalitions. The Stop the War campaign drew together anti-war protestors and Muslim communities who identified strongly with the conflict. However, there were dissonances with respondents who were connected with the armed forces, as they felt that their situation as war veterans was maligned by the widespread public criticism of the Afghanistan campaign.

In other cases, political mobilisation has been more limited to ethno-national communities linked with the conflict region. The case study on the African Great Lakes conflict explored mobilisation relating to the proposed extradition of six people accused of genocide by the Rwandan government, and a series of activities by youth groups associated

with the Democratic Republic of Congo. They found that for groups with relatively little history of migration to or connection with the UK, such as migrants from Rwanda or DRC, protesting against conflict or conflict-related events could be quite isolating. This was because few outside their often narrow ethno-national communities understood the ongoing dynamics of conflict.

Some Rwandan informants were also ambivalent about political mobilisation or being critical of the Rwandan government, saying that they were fearful of repercussions given the ease with which individuals could be identified by the Rwandan High Commission in the UK. Some claimed that they were being closely monitored by the Rwandan High Commission. They feared that the political support given by the UK government to the Rwandan government meant that, if they spoke out, this might affect their immigration status or result in accusations against them for involvement in the genocide, and a threat of extradition.

Services and resources

'Communities of practice' have been actively created as a result of conflicts overseas, as groups of practitioners began to network around particular concerns. The study's work on unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from Afghanistan found that the establishment of an inter-agency 'community of practice' had facilitated information exchange among education specialists, youth workers and an Afghan refugee community organisation.

Good practice examples of policy responses came from Hounslow Council, where services have been prepared for new arrivals in the local community by the circulation of conflict sensitivity information; and another London borough, where a community of practice was established in response to the arrival of unaccompanied child asylum seekers.

Conclusion and policy implications

The research concludes that:
- Government institutions need to use the term 'community' with greater clarity.
- Foreign policy (particularly military) decisions have significant impacts on the various types of UK communities considered in this study. Awareness of the local impacts of such policies needs to be incorporated into decision-making.
- Existing initiatives assisting the development of inter-agency communities of practice provide a valuable, cost-effective way of co-ordinating responses to conflict. They need continuing support.
- Local communities responding to conflicts require access to detailed information. As local and voluntary service providers take on more responsibility for matters such as integration of refugees, it is important to rationalise any centralised provision of information and recognise local expertise among the various communities directly affected.

About the project

The project involved just over 100 interviews conducted between June and September 2010. These were based around six case studies of particular communities associated with the three conflict areas explored in this research, as well as extensive documentary research.

For further information

This *Findings* is part of a programme of work on Globalisation, UK poverty and communities.
See www.jrf.org.uk/globalisation
For more information, please contact Michael Collyer, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN19SJ, UK.
Email: M.Collyer@sussex.ac.uk

The full report, **The impact of overseas conflict on UK communities** by Michael Collyer, Naluwembe Binaisa, Kaveri Qureshi, Lyndsay McLean Hilker, Ceri Oeppen, Julie Vullnetari and Benjamin Zeitlyn, is available as a free download at www.jrf.org.uk

Read more Findings at www.jrf.org.uk
Other formats available.
Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk

JOSEPH ROWNTREE FOUNDATION

Ref: 2611
www.jrf.org.uk