

Mapping UNSW Impact Global Development

Primary SDG	16: PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS
Broad theme	Civilian peacebuilding
Research	Presenting and analysing stories from conflict areas to provide insights into the complexity of life under the Taliban for community members
Impact region	Afghanistan
Faculty	Arts and Social Sciences
School/Institute	Social Sciences / Development Studies
Academic	Dr Susanne Schmeidl
Project partners	The Liaison Office (Afghanistan)
Related SDGs	10: Reduced Inequalities

Elevator pitch

UNSW is helping to compile a book analysing interviews with local Afghanis living under Taliban rule that will challenge a common perception the Taliban is broadly supported by Pashtun tribes. The book will help understand how communities negotiate life in insurgency-controlled and war-torn areas, and it has the potential to inform peace discussions and efforts.

The Challenge: The Taliban is not the face of the Pashtun ethnic group

Since the 2014 withdrawal of international military from Afghanistan, the Taliban has regained control of many parts of Afghanistan and vast areas in the Pashtun belt bordering Pakistan. Many, particularly those in the West, believe the Taliban have wide-spread support from the Pashtun ethnic group, the country's largest ethnic group that comprises 40% of the population. The reality is much more complex and the Pashtun ethnic group is caught between a rock and hard place.

Far from socially homogeneous, the Pashtun ethnic group are comprised of four major confederations, an estimated 60 major tribes and around 300 sub-tribes. Not all Taliban are Pashtuns and not all Pashtuns are Taliban. Under stress and threats from the Taliban, many communities have few choices: they can flee, join-up or shut-up (acquiesce). How these choices are made and why communities acquiesce rather than fight is not yet fully understood. Many assumptions are made but little listening is done.

UNSW's solution: Publish a book of interviews with locals living under Taliban rule

Susanne worked on civilian peacebuilding in Afghanistan for over a decade prior to joining UNSW. She is currently drawing on a rich amount of data collected over her time there and has been translating this work into publications.

In partnership with local Afghan organisations, Susanne is compiling interview data featuring 356 individuals between 2013 and 2015 across three provinces: Helmand, Paktiya and Kunar. Susanne and her Afghan co-author (Rahmatullah Amiri) are going to publish these interviews in a book and provide analysis around them.

The interviews tell the story of 'survival' under Taliban rule. As the current Afghan Government is unable to provide protection to citizens outside major urban centres, many vulnerable citizens flee, acquiesce or join the insurgency for protection. Many cannot afford to flee, because of poverty or the possibility they will lose their land, and 'put up and shut up'. The interviews were translated by Amiri and the book will be published in 2019.

Susanne is also working on a research project to understand how to forge 'social contracts' for resilient peace settlements in war-torn countries. She is compiling a report for the Refugee Council of Australia on Drivers of Forced Migration from Afghanistan, a report that is linked to her work with UNSW Computer Science evaluating conflict and forced migration drivers using data science and online information sources. She was also approached by the American University in Kabul to help establish a Centre on Peacebuilding and Development to train up young professionals in Afghanistan.

The Impact: Minimise discrimination against Pashtuns, influence peace discussions

Susanne hopes the interviews will show the complex nature of Pashtun life under Taliban rule, minimising discrimination against Pashtuns and changing public narrative around what constitutes insurgency support. Susanne expects the book will influence discussions around the pathway to peace and the kind of work undertaken by NGOs and human rights organisations in the country. The book will also seek to portray the Taliban in a different light, demystifying Western romanticism that has grown over time. Susanne says there will be massive forced displacement from Afghanistan unless peace is achieved, and war crimes are dealt with.

Researcher

Dr Susanne Schmeidl is a Lecturer in Development Studies at UNSW. Her research is primarily focussed on understanding conflict and how to resolve it with bottom-up and local solutions. She researched an early warning system for forced migration during her PhD and has worked for the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University in Canada, the Swiss Peace Foundation, and on conflict early warnings with the Intergovernmental Authority for Development in Africa. Born in Germany, she is acutely aware of Nazi history, and is driven by a responsibility to find ways to achieve peace where oppressive regimes dominate.

Ben Falkenmire 21.11.17