

Rethinking Security

for a just and peaceful world



**Alternative
Security
Review**

ROUNDTABLES WITH CIVIL SOCIETY

November 2023

Executive Summary



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Introduction

The Alternative Security Review is a civil society-led review of the UK's security strategy. It is a 3-year project to create public dialogue, through research and civil society engagement, on human and ecological security. By asking people in the UK what matters to them for their security, and by discussing potential solutions to human and ecological security with experts, a cooperative Human Security Strategy will be produced that will offer an alternative to the existential failures of the current 'national security' approach.

Previous research reports by Rethinking Security have provided a foundation for the ASR that amply demonstrates that many countries, and in particular the UK government, tend to define security in a very narrow sense.¹ That is, they define it as the protective role of the state against violent or other disruptive threats to its own sovereignty and prestige. This limited understanding of security is maintained by an elitist and closed approach to policy-making.²

It is the work of the ASR to offer a practical model of how security could be conceived of differently and to demonstrate more cooperative and inclusive methods for gathering input from a wider cross section of public opinion, starting with those most vulnerable or marginalised.

You can [find out more about the project](#), its methodology and proposed outcomes as well as access publications and events, on our website.

The Roundtables with Civil Society

As part of the ASR, Rethinking Security hosted a series of nine roundtable discussions on human security in the UK between March and October 2022. These were with members of civil society groups based in the UK to explore what human security might mean in their context, what insecurities they experience, what organisations are doing to address these insecurities, and what they would recommend for a Human Security Strategy for the UK.

¹ Zsófia Hacsek, [Towards More Inclusive Understandings of Security in the UK: A literature review commissioned by Rethinking Security](#) (Rethinking Security: May 2022); Ben Donaldson and Richard Reeve, [Open Society, Closed Conversations: External Consultation and the Integrated Review](#) (Rethinking Security: Dec 2021); Lillah Fearnley, [Thinking Inside the Box: how Opinion Polls Shape Security Debates and Policy in the UK](#) (Rethinking Security: Jun 2023); Celia McKeon, [Contrasting Narratives A Comparative Study of European and North American National Security Strategies](#) (Rethinking Security: Mar 2018).

² Donaldson and Reeve, Open Society, Closed Conversations



These consultations were in some ways comparable to those that UK governments have carried out for security and other reviews. However, our aim was to invite representatives of groups that experience insecurity or that are unlikely to have access to policy-making spaces in order to develop an understanding of the insecurities faced by people in the UK that often go unheard in elite circles.

The full report on the civil society roundtable discussions begins by setting out the justification and methodology for the series of roundtables. It then summarises the discussions by outlining the challenges to achieving human security, some existing examples of good practice, and recommendations for achieving human security in each area covered by the discussions.

A Note on the word ‘security’

Rethinking Security believes that using the term ‘security’ to advocate for an alternative approach is crucial to achieving change in the understanding of security – what it could mean versus what it is reserved for at present. The UK government places huge importance on ‘national security’ whilst neglecting to place people and the environment at the centre of its thinking about security. In Rethinking Security’s original discussion paper, “true security ... [is defined as]... communities and societies in which people may meet their fundamental needs without jeopardy.”³

During the roundtable discussions, some participants voiced concerns about the use of the word security to denote something positive. In fields as diverse as racial justice and food policy, these participants felt that it is not possible (in the UK) to use the word security to define anything that speaks of inclusion, equality, justice or sustainability. The UK government has brought hard or coercive security policies into its responses to climate change, to asylum policy and policing, and, through for example its application of the Prevent strategy, has prioritised discriminatory ‘national security’ policy in its approach to delivering basic services such as education, health and social care.

At the same time, the use of the word ‘security’ to define positive rights has been abandoned in some public bodies; for example, in the welfare system. Some participants thought that distancing from the language of security was necessary, while others thought that reclaiming it was important.

³ Rethinking Security, [Rethinking Security: A Discussion Paper](#), May 2016



Key Findings

a. Political Security in the UK: Even in a democratic society, foreign and security policy can feel like particularly closed and exclusive worlds, whilst elitism also damages wider participation and inclusion in politics and decision-making.

For those working in civil society groups that advocate on foreign and security policy issues, there was agreement that it is particularly difficult to have alternative ideas heard in these branches of government. Participants described a closed, elitist culture that favours white, male, public school voices and perpetuates established approaches to foreign and security policy.

This traditional understanding of ‘security’, which often uncritically views the UK as a ‘force for good’ in the world, also privileges military responses over alternatives. Arguably, this uncritical view of the military is widely held across British society and has been nurtured by government through education and cultures of remembrance, supported by military and industrial interests.

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Elitism was also regarded as a problem for wider democratic engagement by representatives of groups whose work it is to foster political participation, a key component of the UN definition of human security. Participants described early experiences of the political system, including (lack of) education on political rights and processes, as crucial in determining whether someone will feel empowered to seek help or advocate for change later in life.

Furthermore, if people don’t see themselves represented in the political world – their ethnicity, religion, gender, class or sexuality – they are less likely to feel politics is for them. These barriers were identified as structural inequalities, but formal barriers to participation like the first past the post electoral system and recently introduced voter ID legislation were also recognised.

b. ‘National security’ concerns have crept into many public bodies and imposed duties on public sector workers that undermine cohesion and damage human security. At the same time, the use of the word security to define positive rights has been withdrawn.



For participants in the roundtables on domestic ‘security’ issues, immigration, and economic security, where security used to be used to refer to positive rights or components of human security, this is no longer the case. Concurrently, ‘national security’ policies have entered public bodies in ways that were considered detrimental to human security. Participants described the ‘securitisation’ of health and migration, for example, where policies that have resulted in more surveillance or tighter controls are implemented to counter perceived threats.

The clearest example of the removal of the term ‘security’ to denote a positive right is from social security, where it has been replaced by benefits and universal credit. This language communicates that the economic safety net that many rely on is in fact something that puts them in debt to the state, i.e. that it is not an entitlement.

The most obvious incursion of ‘national security’ in public bodies is the Prevent duty that places a legal duty on health and education workers (and others) to report signs of radicalisation. This duty has caused much damage to relationships, such as the doctor-patient relationship, that should be based on confidentiality and care. It has been particularly damaging for the Muslim community in Britain.

Beyond Prevent, the latest policing acts criminalise some forms of protest and freedom of expression, as well as the ability of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to practice their nomadic lifestyle. Participants also described the way bureaucratic systems are designed to create insecurity. In the roundtable on immigration, participants were unanimous that it is deliberate policy to make interacting with the Home Office difficult. It is a deterrent to gaining legal status, especially for those who have extra needs or are living in poverty.

c. The profit motive undermines progress towards environmental security, particularly in key sectors such as food and energy.

In the three roundtable discussions that covered environmental issues (food and agriculture, energy, and global economic and environmental justice,) participants all agreed that the underlying problem that hinders progress towards environmental security (as understood as a component of human security) is the profit motive, or the way the economy is constructed. The approach of many governments has already created insecurity for millions when it comes to food and energy security, without the added problems of climate change. Global as well as UK-specific practices were covered in these roundtables.



Food was turned into a globally tradable commodity under World Trade Organisation rules that prioritised the liberalisation of food markets. This enabled huge corporations to take control of global food systems while hindering the ability of national governments to pursue policies that supported national strategies or were based on the principle that access to food should be a human right. Speculation also causes price fluctuations that negatively impact human security.

When it comes to decarbonisation and climate justice, it is no secret that the energy sector is driven by the profits of the world's largest companies, whose size and influence are hampering the will and the effort of governments to commit to net zero.

Participants also highlighted a connection between global trends and the UK financial sector. The size and limited regulation of the financial sector in the UK means that UK-based companies can and do invest in environmentally compromising ventures like mining and energy production. These projects are often in low-income countries that need investment but are likely, because of their nature, to both directly damage the local natural environment and contribute to the global breakdown of the climate.

Participants also believed that, when it came to the UK, it was the profit motive, rather than Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that caused widespread energy insecurity as people were left unable to heat their homes in the winter of 2022. This has subsequently been borne out as the six biggest global energy firms reported record profits in 2022, more than double the previous year's.

Just as energy production is controlled by large multinational firms, landownership is concentrated in a few hands in the UK. This means that a small number of companies have a disproportionate influence over UK food production. A transition to more diffuse landownership, which may be necessary in the future to enable food security for all, was thought by participants to be extremely difficult to enact.

As a result, in these profit-driven sectors, policies that support sustainable farming or changes towards decarbonisation to meet the challenges of climate change are lacking in their scope and speed. In the UK, the government is falling short on most, if not all, of its commitments on decarbonisation, renewable energy and projects like insulating homes. In the agricultural sector, participants said there was uncertainty about support and incentives for sustainable farming after Brexit, and little investment in long-term support for things like soil health and training new or young farmers.



Instead, in both agriculture and energy the UK government regards security in terms of balance of trade – securing imports of food and energy and supporting competitive exports. Participants also noted that there is a tendency to invest in tech ‘solutions’ to climate change that are expensive and unproven, including hydrogen and carbon capture, both of which would fit with the business models of existing fossil fuel firms. In agriculture, the government has made funds available for solutions such as vertical farming but is under-investing in the programmes noted above, such as training for new entrants and sustainability funding.

Conclusion

The Alternative Security Review’s roundtable discussions on human security in the UK took place throughout 2022. In February of 2022, Russia initiated a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and as a result (after the demonstrable strategic failure of military interventions in Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan) military ‘security’ was rehabilitated in policy and public discourse. In the same year: there were devastating floods in Pakistan and Nigeria; COP27 made no progress on speeding up decarbonisation; and the UK experienced political and economic turmoil in the latter part of the year that exacerbated a major cost of living crisis. Yet, very little in political discourse suggested that there were serious attempts to address any of the underlying causes of insecurity.

Instead, the input of participants in the roundtable discussions – experts by experience and profession – demonstrated that geopolitical events and the decisions taken by the UK government were having a negative impact on all facets of human security in the UK. The collective message from these roundtable discussions is that, across all sectors, human and environmental security is not prioritised by government. Instead, traditional ideas about ‘national security’ prevail alongside the profit motive. Economic sufficiency, health, access to food and the certainty of a flourishing environment are increasingly not a given for many more millions of people in the UK. New laws and policy on policing, ‘domestic security’ and democratic participation have curtailed community, personal and political security.



Often, precarity or economic insecurity is built into this securitised neo-liberal model, with state and corporate interests directly undermining the personal and ecological security of ordinary people. The participants were able to propose specific policy changes as solutions to the insecurities faced in the UK. But more than that, to identify that the underlying assumptions that inform the priorities of, for example, the political establishment, economic management or energy policy, need to be re-thought and replaced with the belief that inclusion, justice and sustainability are key to human and environmental security.

Most importantly, it was pointed out time and again that the government's conception of security is far too restrictive and when the language of security is used in sectors as diverse as health and food supply chains, trust in government is damaged, especially for those who feel the effects of, or are targeted by, current 'security' policy.

There was also a clear recognition that meeting human and ecological needs provides a firm and mutually reinforcing basis for sustainable security policy, reclaiming the idea of security from 'national security' approaches, which so often undermine personal dignity, trust, community and the environment.



About:

Rethinking Security is a network of UK-based organisations, academics and activists. We work for a just and peaceful world, based on approaches that address the underlying causes of conflict and insecurity. We have a shared concern that the current approach to national security in the UK and beyond often hampers efforts for peace, justice and ecological sustainability. We are committed to building a much richer understanding of what security really means, and of what is required to build sustainable security.

Acknowledgements:

We are grateful to the participants in all roundtables for sharing their thoughts, reflections, challenges and ideas with us as we build a picture of what human or common security could be like in the UK.

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