Role of Public Policy Institutions in Addressing the Challenges of Crime and Corruption

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As the issues of crime and corruption have attracted more scholarly and public policy interest there is a need for academic institutions to consider what is the appropriate role for schools of public policy in dealing with these transnational challenges and how to relate these to government and the broader public.

As a long-time practitioner in the public policy arena it has been interesting to see over the last 10-15 years the migration of attention from viewing crime and corruption as largely national law-enforcement issues to consideration of them as transnational phenomena facilitated by the trends of globalization in the international economy, and having broader implications for governance and economic reforms. In addition, the emerging nexus of terrorism, transnational crime and corruption has introduced a “non-traditional” national security threat requiring both rigorous academic and relevant public policy attention.

Why a Public Policy Focus?

Like many other academic institutions around the world, George Mason University has identified the important need to have programs that address societal problems – including those relating to national security -- that require a policy response from the government or non-government sectors. The academic focus is on practical application of research and study that is directly relevant to important public issues. Until recently these issues have been regarded as either legal issues best address by law schools or part of traditional political science or international trade courses. As corruption, crime and terrorism became of academic interest in their own right, the attention tended to be (1) as isolated phenomena and (2) largely of national importance.

The tragic events of 9/11 provide a global focus for terrorism as an international challenge, so illicit financing, trafficking in persons, and trade in narcotics and counterfeit goods provided a transnational dimension to crime and corruption. Academic research began highlighting the nexus of corruption, crime and terrorism and the threat posed to national security. Neither academics nor policy makers were used to thinking about such non-traditional challenges originating in the non-state sector and their impact on international relations. This “nexus” represents a threat to the legitimacy of state institutions, undermining development and economic reform efforts, and frustrate public desires for good governance. Increasingly this represents a transnational challenge to international relations in particular to a sound financial, commercial and trade environment. Most troubling is recent discovery of
how criminal networks and relationships between criminals and corrupt public officials can facilitate terrorism.

**Purposes of Research**

Academic research on crime began emphasizing the criminal law enforcement or ethical aspects largely in a national context. Or stressing terrorism as an isolated national security threat. Or seeing corruption as an isolated governance issue in a national context. Over time the research approach has evolved into seeing these challenges less as separate and independent phenomena and more as related non-traditional security threats. Initial scholarship tended to be descriptive but is becoming more focused on diagnosing the problem and suggesting new methodological (e.g. emphasis on the role of social networks) tools and theoretical (e.g. criminals as profit maximizers and terrorist behavior explained by a business model) approaches.

Research is now becoming more comparative – the work of this conference being an important example – but also more focused on the impact of the nexus of terrorism, corruption and criminality on the legitimacy of the nation state in a national and international context. This conference, with its attention to Russia and Mexico, helps highlight the degree to which organized crime has penetrated state structures and become a key factor in the economy.

**Role of Public Policy Institutions in Research**

Public policy institutions have a special role to play in research. They represent the logical point of connection between traditional academic and the public policy worlds for national policy-makers, non-government and civil society organizations, media, and the private sector. Further public policy institutions have the potential to bridge academic disciplines with integrative approaches to research that can redefine the nature of national security threats, highlight the role of non-state actors, and identify unanticipated consequences (e.g. exploration of criminal connections in one part of the world leads to challenges in another region) that point to new areas for research.

This functionally integrative role that provides the connective tissue that links academic programs, disciplines and approaches to the practical world of public policy. Beyond that such public policy institutions should consider how research results can inform public policy decision-making that in turn alters for the better the environment in which crime, corruption and terrorism interact.

This depends on whether the domestic political environment in which the public policy institute functions encourages such a role. At its most basic level this means being able to disseminate the results of research to the widest public audience. One step might involve creating an international community, network or forum of public policy institutions who agree to promote research of member institutions in this area. For researchers exploring sensitive areas of crime and corruption this can also become a support network from outside to give them moral support and also a shield for their work.
Beyond that ought to be an effort to use social media more effectively not only to share research results but create forums that would encourage students and scholars alike to share ideas particularly on new methodological approaches (e.g. alternative business models for criminals and terrorists).

Another step could be using research to help inform the private sector on how to avoid pitfalls presented by criminal and terrorist connections to illicit financing mechanisms and trade in counterfeit goods. With Russia, Mexico and the US members of the G-20, and thus key actors in the global economy, research on illicit financing and trade in counterfeit goods could lead to policy action at the global level.

Yet another approach might be to focus on research results on illegal narcotics trade and human trafficking – where virtually all governments, civil society organizations and the public have a common concern -- that suggest policy steps governments could take to break the nexus between corruption and transnational crime. It would also provide an opportunity to engage executive, legislative and judicial sectors in a common effort. Mexico, Russia, and the United States could benefit from both the citizen and government point of view.

Research might also be used to suggest how policy makers – drawing on important lessons from both Mexico and Russia -- should conduct privatization programs to avoid the transfer of state and public assets to oligarchs and criminals, or even how to increase accountability in civil society organizations regarding grants management.

Finally such research – here too the experience of Russia and Mexico could be valuable -- might examine the impact of the “resource curse” on corruption and criminality. In particular how windfalls accruing to energy producing countries might encourage corruption and its criminal connections leading to delegitimization of the very institutions of government that the financial windfall generated by energy resources ought to be strengthening. There is a body of academic work that focuses on various mechanisms that increase transparency regarding revenue inflows but there is less work on mechanisms for ensuring transparency of government expenditures tied to energy income.

Role of Public Policy Institutions in Education and Training

Traditional academic programs have tended to focused on crime, terrorism, and corruption as discrete course offerings as part of broader security or criminological-oriented program. It has been hard to integrate these into a single course offering because of the difficulty in finding a single professor with the background necessary to conduct such a comprehensive course. Alternatively a course could have several modules taught by different professors.

Another approach for public policy institutions would be to develop an executive development/training program that would be aimed at the professional development of government officials, civil society representatives, and the business community. The core courses would emphasize understanding the underlying political, social, and economic conditions that contribute to the spread of crime and corruption and lead to linkages with international terrorist movements. There could be discussion of alternative “business models” criminals and terrorists have deployed. This could be supplemented with case studies of real world situations where crime, corruption and terrorism have interacted. In addition
there should be a forward looking component that attempts to anticipate new areas for criminal activity (e.g. environmental crimes, changing patterns of illegal narcotics trade, illicit financial networks facilitated by social networking) and the international linkages likely to emerge.

Role of Public Policy Institutions in Recommending Policy Changes

Perhaps the most important role public policy institutions can play is constructing the public policy tools and approaches that government and public alike can use to break the nexus among terrorism, transnational crime and corruption. Here are several examples:

- Building cooperation and partnerships between government and non-government actors. Legislators, judicial officials, and executive policy-makers may need assistance to reach out to civil society organizations to work on, say, human trafficking. A public policy institution could become the convener and neutral idea generator for such effective cooperation.

- Corruption and criminal activities that increase the cost of goods and services including government services to consumers, the general public, and legitimate business people alike take on added significance in the context of the global economic downturn. Public institutions can provide a mechanism for increased transparency, whether it is counterfeit goods forcing the legitimate producers to close down factories, or bribery in public health care system that affects the availability general health care to the public at large. The resulting public awareness may increase pressure on authorities to act against corrupt officials and criminals.

- The international character of crime, corruption and terrorism requires international cooperation as well as citizen involvement. Diplomacy can play an important role in particular on issues such as human trafficking or illegal narcotics trade. Public policy institutions through research and engagement with foreign policy officials can suggest forms of international cooperation; or provide expert advice in areas where traditional diplomats lack the expertise to understand the issues or the complex web of interaction among crime, corruption, and terrorism.

- Public private partnerships can play a valuable role in drawing attention to, and suggesting action to counter, corruption and organized crime. Public policy institutions are well positioned to convene such partnerships and develop “best practices” that might be shared elsewhere.

- Understanding the role of the media including social networks in increased transparency regarding crime and corruption. Numerous examples suggest that criminals fear public exposure and corrupt politicians fear the humiliation that accompanies media reporting of their activities. Public disclosure requirements on financial transactions in one country can be significant for other countries as well. Helping media understand – through training of journalists as well as public presentations of research – where the sources of publicly available information are may be another contribution public policy institutions can make.
Conclusion

Public policy institutions can play a valuable role in integrating scholarship and research being done by experts in terrorism, transnational crime and corruption. Such experts who work in countries where they have a secure basis for conducting these activities, can explore new mechanisms to collaborate with colleagues in countries where engaging in such research is an act of courage.

Integration of academic and public policy activities can help reveal the complex interlocking web created, for example, when criminals and terrorists share channels of illicit international finance, and criminals and corrupt government officials disrupt the functioning of normal market behavior by flooding markets with counterfeit goods. Further, public policy institutions can alert policy makers and public alike to the dangers associated with the nexus of crime, terrorism and corruption for national security and in some cases the integrity and legitimacy of the state. As damaging is each of these phenomena played out in a national context, taken together they present a multinational threat to national and international security and social well-being requiring international action.