POLICY BRIEF

Making Security Sector Reform Work for Local Populations

The security sector is broadly understood as the set of institutions that have the legitimate capacity to exercise coercive power. It includes military and paramilitary forces, justice and law enforcement institutions, and security management and oversight bodies. Non-statutory security forces are also included depending on the context. A main task of security sector reform (SSR) is to transform these institutions so that they respect democratic norms, observe principles of good governance, and contribute to the development of a well-functioning security framework (Scott-Jallah 2008). SSR is both political and technical in nature. It is meant to be holistic and transformative and link security and development. Yet, there is often a disconnect between SSR in theory and practice.

SSR processes are predominantly planned and implemented in isolation from society, due in part to the political nature of decision making in SSR planning and implementation. Donors and national political elites work together to identify priorities for limited aid dollars. These negotiations are at senior levels, often with a focus on quickly providing training and equipment to national armies or new police services. The perspectives of local populations are often excluded (Naraghi-Anderlini 2008) and inquiries into what security means at the level of the community, family, or individual are rarely conducted. As a result, SSR is critiqued for being haphazard and for focusing on the short-term symptoms of insecurity rather than root causes. Additionally, the processes are criticized for being more accountable to donors than locals, poorly coordinated, and overly concerned with the security of the state.

In order to improve the effectiveness of SSR processes and donors' technical assistance, four key principles should be heeded. First, local ownership of SSR is crucial to seeing results on the ground. Second, medium-to-long-term SSR investments are necessary. Third, strong coordination among donors and local and non-state actors is vitally important. Finally, improved knowledge about differing conceptions of security—particularly those held by local marginalized populations—is needed.

Security sector reform has been criticized for excluding local populations and context. This policy brief, a part of NSI's *mySecurity* project, identifies four areas where greater attention to the local is needed. Emphasizing the need to improve current and future approaches to SSR, it offers recommendations for how to create and sustain security.

Militiamen of the Union of Islamic Courts easily mingle with civilians in Mogadishu, Somalia.

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Support Local Ownership and Engage Non-state Actors

Local ownership of SSR should be regarded as a pragmatic necessity. Societies must be engaged in shaping SSR processes and their content because reforms that are not developed and driven by local actors are unlikely to be implemented properly or sustained (Donais 2008). Many donor governments and organizations have made commitments to this principle, which has become more of a rhetorical device than a guide to donor practice (Nathan 2007). Recent evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) shows that, absent local participation in decision making, little progress is being made in SSR or wider stabilization efforts (Oxfam 2012).

The importance of local ownership raises questions about what exactly ownership, control, and influence mean. Laurie Nathan (2007) provides the clearest answer, explaining that "the principle of local ownership of SSR means that the reform of security policies, institutions and activities in a given country must be designed, managed and implemented by domestic actors rather than external actors."

Local and non-state actors play a critical role in the provision of justice and security services in many of the world's fragile and conflict-affected countries, particularly when government service delivery is extremely weak (Scheye 2011). Several reform processes are often occurring across a range of public institutions, which makes achieving a coordinated approach to SSR a challenge. Local actors, such as domestic non-governmental organizations, hereditary chiefs, or church groups, can play a central role in supporting the cohesiveness of reform initiatives and ensuring that reforms reflect the changing needs of a population and the context in which it functions. These actors also have a principal role in determining which national and international actors are legitimate and holding them to account. Strengthening legitimate institutions and governance to better provide citizen security and justice is crucial to breaking cycles of violence (World Bank 2011).

It is crucial to reflect on which local and non-state actors are being engaged in SSR processes. The local actors that donors engage with, even among civil society organizations, frequently represent a thin slice of society—one that benefits from higher socio-economic status. Local ownership is important, but engaging with representatives of all subsections of society, particularly those groups—such as the poor, youth, or rural women—who do not have easy access to decision-makers and whose conceptions of security likely differ from the elite, is equally important in creating sustainable security. Since improving the security, safety, and basic living conditions of the public is a fundamental objective of SSR processes, it is imperative to create conditions for meaningful public participation in these processes.

Invest in Medium- and Long-Term Processes

Successful reform of the security sector can only be achieved with a long-term vision and commitment to institution building (D'Souza 2011). Evidence from Liberia suggests that "a long-term commitment to institution building, economic growth, and social recovery" is necessary to ensure effective peacebuilding, of which SSR is a fundamental part (Blaney, Klein, and McFate 2010). Analysis of Sierra Leone shows that long-term funding has supported the "most comprehensive" program thus far in post-conflict SSR efforts (Law 2006).

To best support SSR, donors must look beyond the short-term horizon of their electoral cycles and make long-term commitments to developing countries. Leaders in states that are undergoing SSR must also take the long view. Local actors, both within and outside of government, can support long-term commitments, strengthen the legitimacy of SSR by engaging in SSR processes, and hold domestic leaders and international donors to account.

Ensure Strong Coordination and a Multilateral Approach

The number of political, security, humanitarian, and development actors involved in SSR has grown. Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation figures from 2007 indicate that donors conducted over 15,000 missions in 54 recipient countries (Economist 2008), demonstrating a clear need to coordinate initiatives and increase effectiveness. Experience from the DRC illustrates that poor coordination and political incoherence results in piecemeal interventions that have limited impact on improving security (Open Society Foundations 2012). Donors' disparate ministries and departments must be able to organize SSR programs. Donors must ensure a common framework for SSR that includes policy guidance, planning and programming, monitoring and evaluation, flexible funding mechanisms, and skilled human resources (Hermsmeyer 2010).

Such coordination is promoted in major international statements on aid effectiveness, including the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action (OECD 2012). The New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States, agreed in 2011, includes a "one vision, one plan" pillar which highlights the need for each country to have a single national vision and plan as a guiding framework for all its initiatives (IDPS 2011). Donors' stated commitments to dismantle silos and develop new modalities for collaborative work are essential. Mechanisms to strengthen coordination include promoting national ownership, mapping initiatives at various levels, and devolving spending and strategic programming choices to authorities in the field.

Understand Diverse Conceptions of Security

The traditional conception of security privileges issues related to state security; however, as globalization pushes states to interact more and into interdependent relationships, conceptions of security have expanded to include ideological, economic, and cultural dimensions. As a result, there has been a move toward a people-centred approach which focuses on the perceptions of local populations rather than states' strategic security considerations. With this shift, the focus of security policy is broadening from an almost exclusive focus on states to include the well-being of populations and human rights.

Understandings of what it means for an individual to be secure are informed by a myriad of factors. Generally, personal security in the global North is highly related to the individual while in much of the global South, it is much more closely related to the security of a group, particularly the family. Cultural and gender norms play a significant role in influencing an individual's sense of security. Women often have unique security concerns that are rooted in their lack of empowerment and economic independence and embedded in culture and customary practices.

Given these diverse understandings of security, tension is apparent when donors try to apply tools developed and useful in one context to another context, without reflecting deeply on them or the new context. The potential for poor results is high and, in the extreme, lasting harm could be done. Donors can support more relevant programming with greater chances of success by working to understand what security means to individuals and groups in local contexts. They should engage with civil society and non-state actors while considering gender and power dynamics.

Recommendations

Reforming the security sector is a highly political process that requires a broad developmental approach. Studies show that an understanding of the local context is critical and local ownership must be the point of departure. In order to see lasting results from their SSR investments, donors and their development partners should:

■ Work together to develop and enact long-term plans that are sensitive to context and the needs of all parts of the population.

■ Ensure strong coordination among all relevant actors including, but not limited to, donors, recipient governments, local and international civil society organizations, and multilateral organizations.

■ Prepare technical advisers—such as seconded police officers or military trainers—with political, developmental, and contextual sensitivity and understanding, including an awareness of different conceptions of security.

■ Invest in research, including surveys or national polling, to better understand how populations think about their security, how those understandings change over time, and how policy and programming can be improved to achieve better results. ☯

The North-South Institute is currently developing a research project that assesses the policy and practical implications of the apparent disconnect between conceptions of security that inform donors' technical assistance and those of vulnerable populations. Through this project, NSI seeks to improve donor policy, contribute to more effective aid and program delivery, and increase support for creating secure environments in fragile and conflict-affected states.

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South Sudanese police officers on the streets of the capital Juba.

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