

“Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments”

Meeting Notes

17 February 2010

Background

On 17 February 2010, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform (GPP) hosted a book launch and discussion on *Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments*, the latest publication in the Yearbook series of the (DCAF). Bringing such critical pieces of work to the fore and discussing them with a wide audience of practitioners and experts is part of the GPP's mandate to act as a knowledge platform and a sounding board for the validation of peacebuilding practice and tools.

Security Sector Reform in Challenging Environments is meant to feed into theoretical re-thinking of SSR policy frameworks and to aid practitioners in conducting effective SSR in barely enabling environments. Building on the material consolidated in the book, the event highlighted experiences and lessons learned amidst unpredictable and highly political realities, emphasising the obstacles that security sector reform (SSR) faces in these contexts, the opportunities that SSR might nonetheless build upon, and the approaches that ultimately enable such meaningful progress. Following an overview of ideal and real SSR environments, the presentations delivered at the book launch offered evidence-based analyses of positive and negative SSR records, referring more specifically to the inception, design and implementation of national SSR programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sri Lanka.

Ideal Conditions vs. Real Efforts in Security Sector Reform

Ideally, SSR should be guided by a common, holistic vision, sustained at the national level through political will and stakeholder commitment, and upheld internationally via long-term capacity building. Yet, this is rarely the case and practitioners point to a host of challenging dynamics. At the international level, actors lack a unified voice, rely on distinct definitions of SSR, and arrive at disconnected priorities. Despite this lack of coordination, external actors expect however a comprehensive national approach to SSR as well as readiness to follow the prescribed recipes for reform. Additionally, outsiders often send mixed signals in relation to governmental approaches and standards, hindering political and institutional change in situations already far from being conducive to such reforms. Lastly, donor fatigue, the rush to 'free and fair' elections, and an overemphasis on local ownership further frustrate international reform efforts, paving the way for exit strategies and providing an excuse for external actors to move away from demanding post-conflict SSR activities.

Alternatively, at the national level, SSR is often hampered by traditional structures of power and authority, which protect the status quo and resist efforts to instil democratic control over SSR efforts. In some countries, historically weak parliaments are reluctant to institutionalize their oversight roles and responsibilities despite receiving external assistance for this purpose. In many

instances, security institutions continue to engage in physical abuse and extortion practices, heightening the levels of distrust and suspicion that underpin civil-military relations. When national actors do sign on to suggested security sector reforms, they often do so for financial reasons, perceiving the process as ultimately top-down and insufficiently tailored to local social dynamics.

Unintended consequences speak further to the complexity and uncertainty of SSR activities in post-war environments. Some of the negative developments include: an aggravation of conflict dynamics as a result of the political nature of SSR; the vilification of external actors in local print media by reform-unfriendly nationalist forces; and the reshuffling of domestic power structures to the benefit of locals with strong links to international actors. However, the design and implementation of SSR activities are also associated with unexpected positive developments, most notable being the creation and strengthening of trust between previously antagonistic actors who came to resolve their differences on account of close collaboration during reform processes. In a similar vein, SSR practitioners have come across some unexpected opportunities, enjoying, for instance, high levels of credibility and authority after extended presence in the country or when demonstrating keen sensitivity to specific cultural realities. Training the right people with the necessary background is therefore key in ensuring the achievement of SSR objectives.

Furthermore, generating good security sector governance is linked to the recognition that SSR is a long-term process that requires careful consideration of timing and entry points for the activities involved. Working towards small successes and avoiding multiple failures helps reassure the population and keep stakeholders involved. As regards stakeholders themselves, it can be useful to engage a wider cross-section of the population, thereby capitalising on potential grassroots desires for change and for the adoption of international norms in the sphere of security sector governance. Finally, there might be instances where there is no suitable context for SSR and where no action at all is better than ill-suited, hasty efforts, which will prove counter-productive in the long run.

Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sri Lanka: The Past is Always Present

Although there are some achievements in DRC's security sector reform, the tendency is to reproduce at the same time actions of the past, rebuilding the previous order and the army under colonial times. Congo's political power struggles have severely constrained the options available under SSR, upholding inefficient oversight mechanisms, poor gender sensitivity, lack of vetting procedures for human rights abusers, and a general unwillingness to implement a strategic plan that would cover the key SSR issues. Reasons for such inefficiency go back to the first generation of SSR (1998-2001), when donors arrived in the country expecting to build on an assumed minimum level of security, capacity, and oversight. However, at this time, DRC was not able to meet any of these minimum requirements: the government had little control over its territory and politics was simply a means to continue the war. Although a ceasefire agreement had been reached, it did not result in a meaningful political agreement.

SSR did, however, enter a second generation (2001-2006), capitalizing on a political agreement that was reached at the end of 2002 and the emergence of additional support from new donors such as DFID. These two developments marked the origins of a common national vision and the ability to finally attain some institutional progress (e.g. integrated high command for the armed forces, oversight of the military). However, implementation was slow and curtailed by the political ramifications of SSR, so fighting intensified on the battlefield and violence against civilians continued unabated. With elections approaching, unified national and international effort reduced SSR to more manageable proportions. The ensuing simplified SSR plan meant that

the differing warring factions would be merged together into a single army, with the purpose of preventing a blood bath rather than training an effective military force. Soon however, due to the sheer size of the country and the variety of donors involved, SSR efforts ran yet again into numerous problems. These persisted throughout the third phase (2006-present), when the army faced the dual task of undergoing integration and suppressing belligerent armed non-state actors. To make matters more complex, the Congolese armed forces were subjected to different SSR strategies due to diverging understandings of SSR amongst donors. For example, countries such as China and Angola perceive SSR to be a process that prioritises the protection of governance structures over the protection of individuals. Nonetheless, some moderate level of success came about as a result of stronger centralization, smoother decision making at the national level, and readiness to strategically revise SSR implementation.

Many of the lessons emerging from the DRC experience reflect the need to consider SSR as a political issue rather than a technical question. In war-torn societies, most actors came to power through the 'barrel of a gun', with the result that they often consider SSR as little more than another bargaining tool. Military justice, or lack thereof, further compounds the problems faced in security sector reform – while the scale of the conflict has decreased, civilian deaths continue to rise and most of the perpetrators are in fact army soldiers. Likewise, while today efforts are directed towards healing victims of 'sexual terrorism', little to no attention is paid to the culprits, who are quite frequently army soldiers. Moreover, the institutions that are supposed to oversee civilian-military relations are toothless, lacking the power and capacity to proactively curb abuse. Last but not least, gender blindness is hardly an enabling factor for SSR, as women remain the prime victims of the Congolese security forces and continue to be underrepresented in the armed forces.

Historical context is equally relevant for the current impact of SSR in Sri Lanka as well as for the future of such programmes in the country. In 1948, in post-independence Sri Lanka, the security sector did not have the military infrastructure to carry out any reforms. Even though this landscape eventually transitioned into a real security sector, the latter developed in response to ethnic conflict and has been essentially shaped by it. Accordingly, excessive funding for the defence budget, poorly structured procurement, and a hasty management have been the traditional hallmarks of the Sri Lankan security sector. In 2002, a ceasefire agreement laid the foundations for a peace process, but its prospects turned bleak by 2005, when sporadic fighting reignited the conflict. Furthermore, while a nationally-driven Defence Review Committee was set up in the wake of the ceasefire agreement, the momentum was lost as the initiative excluded the president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Thereafter, with the return to violent ethnic conflict, there were few remaining opportunities to reform the security sector and there were instead far more pressing preoccupations to preserve the government's monopoly of force. The conclusion of the civil war did not bring about the end of ethnic conflict or the possibility for reducing the key obstacles to SSR – on the contrary, the chief of the armed forces has since secured a 50% increase in the size of the military, justifying the move on grounds of prevention. Moreover, corruption, impunity and media politicization paired with under-representation of minority groups and absence of political will pose further problems to the restructuring of the Sri Lankan armed forces.

Very importantly, however, at this stage there are multiple opportunities to address the malfunction of security sector governance. First off, the defeat of LTTE offers the possibility to rethink the new mission, purpose and structure of the armed forces; secondly, the country has a history of integrating radical parties into mainstream politics, thus having the capacity to bring a LTTE shift from a military to a political footing; thirdly, despite the various measures that have curbed freedom of expression in Sri Lanka, the country still benefits from a vibrant civil society

(e.g. women's organisations, media, academia) that has the ability to exert pressure on the government and raise public awareness on security forces' approach to human rights, access to justice and post-conflict confidence-building; fourth and final, an extended mandate has been granted to the President of the country, enabling him to make the necessary security sector reforms that go beyond deterring future insurgency. If SSR is to be successfully implemented in Sri Lanka, the process needs to address the root causes of conflict, boost the judicial and legislative architectures, and ensure that local ownership over SSR practices does not fall prey to political rivalries. Throughout these endeavours, it is advisable that stakeholders be realistic, avoid donor timelines, and start small.

Insights from Comparative Analysis

Contrary to SSR blueprints devised in remote capitals and based on inclusive, comprehensive approaches, real SSR experiences point to a number of factors that undermine such expectations. Security sector reform is oftentimes partial and segmented, geared mostly towards efficiency rather than accountability, and oblivious of the need for careful review. In various nations that are still in conflict, the daunting task at hand is not only to reform the security sector but also to stabilize the country. The difficulty of reforms is compounded by the fact that SSR is part of the larger processes of nation-building and democratization. Rulers oppose meaningful checks and balances, provide immunity to their own elite guards, and often proceed to the ethnicization of the army. When the latter is also involved in human rights violations and looting, providing training and capacity without focus on accountability simply renders soldiers a more efficient abusive force. Even when peace agreements are signed, they continue the tradition of factional separation over integration, with one group acquiring control over the air force, another over the police, and so on.

Hence, at the national level, actors involved in SSR need to consider alternative systems of governance coupled with aid conditionality; internationally, the focus should lie with better prioritization of institutions targeted for reform as well as with enhanced donor coordination.

Reflections & Final Remarks

The holistic approach to SSR comes across at every stage of the analysis, signalling the appropriate but warning against the reality. From the outset, the book emphasizes that reform of inadequate security structures should be an overarching, cross-cutting and participatory process. The case studies reveal, however, an excessive military focus, documenting to a much lesser extent the work carried out in other areas (e.g. rule of law, police, transitional justice). While their intent may have been to give a voice to people on the ground who partake in specific reform efforts, these accounts also beg the question of how restricted the SSR enterprise really is given the crowded donor landscape and the variety of stakeholders involved.

In challenging environments, the media, for instance, brings important assets to bear in terms of communication channels. SSR documentation may not find its way to the combatants in the 'bush' as experience in Central Africa shows, but radio transmissions like those of Radio Okapi in DRC are able to reach the farthest of places; furthermore, they have a significant political impact insofar as they broadcast voices from the field. Yet, media outlets can also complicate SSR processes – in Sri Lanka, for example, a controversial proposal on the Defence Review Committee was leaked to the media and published by national newspapers, thus intensifying the political altercation between the President and the Prime Minister.

In fact, most problems encountered in SSR stem from what happens in state politics. Parliamentarians, for instance, can receive excellent training as part of SSR processes, but the extent to which this training yields concrete progress depends on the way in which parliamentarians are actually elected. Likewise, if state institutions are notably weak, creating a modern and professional army can lead to a scenario where the military becomes the entity most prepared to take on statebuilding.

The lesson, therefore, is one of pragmatism and humility. By no means a model, SSR is more of a path throughout which you may at times get off track, take a few detours, and even get thrown back. Equally important and instructive though is the scrutiny of positive SSR experiences, such as South Africa. These experiences may not point to the golden rule, but they might provide guidance as to what SSR is missing in specific contexts.