Why Security Sector Reform has to be Negotiated

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Why Security Sector Reform has to be Negotiated

The implementation of Security Sector Reform (SSR) faces many challenges, such as lack of technical capacity, limited political will, tensions within society, or donors ignoring the given context and imposing their own agendas. Dialog, negotiation and mediation provide avenues to deal with these challenges in a consensus-oriented manner, leading to more legitimate and sustainable outcomes.

By Simon J. A. Mason

There is no globally accepted definition of SSR, but the UN defines the goal of SSR as being the “enhancement of effective and accountable security for the state and its peoples”. It is this dual commitment to provide effective and accountable security that distinguishes most interpretations of SSR from other types of security cooperation, assistance and reform. Nevertheless, the exact use of the term “SSR” and the emphasis on a specific aspect within it is highly contextual. SSR is undertaken by a diverse range of societies, for many different reasons, and it is a process rather than a finite goal. A country may engage in SSR to make more efficient use of its resources, which often goes hand in hand with a new threat assessment, such as Switzerland after the end of the Cold War. A post-conflict state may seek a new mission for its army in reorienting it to take up an international peacekeeping role, such as Burundi after the peace agreement in 2000.

To clarify the broad and often confusing use of the term, it is helpful to trace two main roots to the development of SSR, one in the “North” and one in the “South”: The “Northern” root of SSR can be traced to democratization processes in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, where post-authoritarian states sought to change their civil-military relations and deal with their new national threat assessment.

At the same time, there was a reorientation of the development community at the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, technical, financial or policy assistance from Northern countries to the military of their Southern partners occurred along the East-West divide. With the end of the Cold War came the opportunity for Southern states to resolve long-suppressed conflicts within their territory. Meanwhile, Northern countries could now shed the polarized Cold War ideology within their development programs and replace them with a modernization and development agenda.

The peace and development community had traditionally shied away from engaging with security issues, but in the late 1990s a number of Northern development donors began to realize that conflict was an obstacle to development that could only be overcome by working with the security sector.

It was in this context that SSR developed as a holistic concept, highlighting the numerous linkages between different formal institutions of state security provision (e.g. military, police, intelligence) and civilian authorities responsible for their democratic
SSR Priority Actions

Twelve steps of an ideal type SSR process as outlined by the African Security Sector Network (ASSN).

1. Understanding and political will: SSR requires a national dialog to create understanding and consensus on what the security sector is and what SSR may entail. National consensus and commitment to the need for changes in the security sector are needed before taking any further steps, and this needs to include all segments of society, e.g. youth, women's groups, religious leaders, business actors, and traditional authorities.

2. Initial needs-assessment: Closely linked to the first step, a nation-wide initial needs assessment of how people want their security sector to develop is essential for national ownership of any SSR process.

3. Contain short-term threats: There may be a need for rapid action to contain short-term threats that have arisen due to the new context. For example, after the end of armed conflict, criminal activity or domestic violence often flourishes. Fast action may be needed to minimize the risk of these threats derailing the longer-term transition process.

4. Establish structures: The government needs to establish structures to manage and coordinate SSR planning and implementation.

5. Strategic Analysis: A strategic analysis needs to clarify a nation's vision of society for the future. The second part of the strategic analysis is a national threat assessment to the vision and future security of the country.

6. National Security Policy Framework: The National Security Policy (NSP) Framework summarizes the national consensus on the security sector status quo, where it should be headed and how to get there, introducing priorities of actions in order to focus on how to implement the vision.

7. Individual Institutional / Agency Policy Frameworks: Based on the NSP, similar policy framework documents should be developed for the various institutions and agencies, such as the defense policy. These policy frameworks have to be supervised by the respective oversight structures (e.g. parliament and justice).

8. Gap analysis: Gap analysis assesses the present institutional capacity and compares it to the stated tasks, detailing the changes needed.

9. Transformation strategy: The transformation strategy outlines how to implement the changes needed that are outlined in the gap analysis, so as to move towards the national vision, deal with the nation's present and future threats and comply with the priorities of actions outlined in the national and institutional policy frameworks.

10. Financial feasibility plan: The financial feasibility plan clarifies which resources are needed and available for the various actions outlined in the transformation strategy; it has to be supervised by the respective oversight structures.

11. Governance and oversight structures: The political and legal structures to provide oversight of SSR have to be developed and linked from the very beginning, in order to ensure that a civilian, democratic oversight is maintained.

12. Risk management: Problems will arise, but careful risk management can minimize the chances of these derailing the entire SSR process.


control and oversight (e.g. executive ministries, justice systems, parliaments, independent oversight bodies), as well as informal and non-state actors affecting the security of a country (e.g. armed groups such as militias, paramilitaries, local defense groups but also civil society actors, the media and the public at large). The advantage of the SSR concept is precisely its emphasis on a systemic and strategic approach to the provision of security that is governed by both legal and political accountability. The alternative is a piecemeal change in one aspect of the security sector (e.g. defense policy) irrespective of another (e.g. the justice system), and a resulting disregard for the dangers of increasing effectiveness in the absence of accountability. SSR shifted the focus in Northern security interventions away from "state security", towards people-oriented "human security".

The "Southern" roots of SSR can be traced to African scholarship and practice in places where SSR was undertaken in post-conflict countries or after changes in the form of governance, with a primary objective of bringing the armed forces under democratic control. The SSR process in South Africa after the end of Apartheid became the first successful model of locally owned and financed SSR in Africa. The South African experience showed the importance of a broad national dialog as the basis for SSR, of developing an understanding of the issues involved, as well as of a national vision to guide SSR. The implementation of this vision across the board thus requires setting of political priorities, developing action plans, and simultaneously building expertise and capacity to manage and coordinate SSR-related activities.

Yet if South African SSR is generally seen as a success, it also demonstrates the typical challenges of reform insofar as progress was not uniform across all aspects of the security sector. Thus there have been greater advancements and successes in defense reform, while major challenges remain regarding the question of how the police handle the high levels of crime. The South African experience also shows that SSR takes time—decades rather than years. Therefore, continued attention of all relevant stakeholders is necessary to maintain the advancements made during the early post-conflict years.

Carrying the experience from South Africa forward, a network of African analysts, in collaboration with committed Africanists, embarked on a process of experience-sharing in the late 1990s— including in South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana. The lessons learned from this exchange fed into the SSR policy development process at the international level and in particular among Northern development donors.

The African Security Sector Network outlines twelve "priority actions" for SSR processes in a post-conflict context (Box 1). These actions do not necessarily need to be followed in sequence, as some steps may differ or even become irrelevant, depending on the nature of the context. Nevertheless, the twelve priority actions highlight that some steps need to precede others (e.g. step one and two have to happen before the following steps) if one seeks to implement SSR in a context-sensitive manner.

Challenges of SSR Implementation

There seem to be two paradoxes at the heart of SSR in post-conflict contexts; one relates to capacity, the other to political will. Eboe Hutchful argues that one of the key paradoxes of SSR is that the greatest need for SSR often arises precisely in those states that have the weakest capacity to implement reforms. The second paradox relates to political will, with a potential tension between the goal of local and national ownership and the explicitly normative content of SSR. The UN SSR definition says SSR must be "led by national authori-
ties”, yet it must also improve the account-
ability of the security sector and entail “full
respect for human rights and the rule of
law”. These two paradoxes lead to a series
of challenges in implementing SSR pro-
cesses in post-conflict contexts.

On the Northern side, there is a tendency
for donors to take on a prescriptive and
sometimes arrogant approach, where the
“reformed” tell others what to do – echoing
the modernization and developmental ide-
ology that some forms of SSR stem from.
Another challenge is that donors are often
limited by short timeframes, wanting to
display tangible results quickly to their do-
nomestic constituencies who are funding SSR
programs with their taxes. Furthermore,
donors have also often ignored the specifi-
cities of the local context. One of the great-
est challenges of many SSR programs is
that donors demand that countries develop
towards a form of state that is similar to the
one they know in the North: a Weberian
type, multi-party, liberal democracy, with
rule of law, separation of powers and some
form of representation of people in govern-
ment. Experience in many Southern coun-
tries where SSR takes place has shown that
exporting models of government and insti-
tutions from one context into a very differ-
ent context is a recipe of failure.

A final challenge to many SSR programs in
the North is that international actors may
misuse SSR for their own self-interested
and contradicting agendas, for example, re-
lated to peace promotion on the one hand,
but focusing on counter-terrorism or eco-
nomic interests in exporting weapons on
the other hand. It is expected that Northern
SSR donors have their own agendas when
promoting SSR – but the question is how

Instead of calling for quick results,
donors are starting to focus on
negotiated SSR processes.

far these are made transparent and negoti-
ated with the Southern partners, or im-
posed upon them. This type of manipu-
lation of the SSR agenda should be clearly
distinguished from reform policies that in-
stead seek to provide both state and human
security by improving both the effectiveness
and the accountability of the security sector.

On the Southern side, challenges to SSR
involve the lack of technical expertise in se-
curity affairs and SSR, as well as a lack of
consensus-based political will for SSR. If

an SSR is conducted in such an environ-
ment, actors such as the military and police
have an unfair advantage in expressing
their voices because of their status as secu-
ritry experts, while populations may see se-
curity affairs as a taboo subject on which
they have no right to an opinion. If inter-
national experts are flown in for a few
weeks to consult other constituencies as
part of an early SSR assessment phase, the
result is a superficial consultation rather
than a broad-based national dialog. A wid-
er range of security sector actors, e.g. tradi-
tional leaders, religious authorities, youth,
women, and business actors may not have
the knowledge to understand the terms of
the discussion, let alone have the time to
shape their own vision and strategy for
how to achieve that vision. International
experts, furthermore, often do not have the
necessary contextualized knowledge to
shape their questions in a manner to bring
forth relevant information, thus biasing
their needs assessment.

Countries engaging in an SSR process ei-
ther after conflict or in another type of
transitional phase will typically still be pre-
occupied with deep-rooted tensions and
thus may lack the political will for SSR. A
government’s power (especially in authori-
tarian regimes) often lies with the security
sector, and such governments are likely to
be very sensitive to any changes in this sec-
tor. If not carried out with the greatest care,
SSR processes in such an environment are
more likely to mirror, or even escalate these
tensions, rather than transform them in a
consensus-based manner.

Lack of capacity, unclear political will and
tensions within society are not reasons to
avoid preparing for, or starting an SSR pro-
cess, but they do call for greater efforts and
much more time in developing nation-wide un-
derstanding of the security sector, as
well as a nation-wide politi-
cal will built across lines of ten-
sions in society, so that any SSR
process is guided by a shared vision, rather
than standard approaches imposed by the
Northern donor community.

Dialog, Negotiation, Mediation

Since many SSR processes take place in the
South with the support of Northern do-
 nors, there are questions about who makes
decisions about what is done, how it is
done and by whom it is done, both by dif-
f erent actors in a country undergoing SSR,
as well as between that country and its do-
nors. The importance of capacity, political
will and decision making in SSR is the rea-
son why dialog, negotiation and mediation
are key tools in dealing with the challenges
of implementing SSR, as they are all con-
sensus-oriented tools that seek mutually
acceptable outcomes in contrast to pre-
scriptive approaches imposed by one actor
against the will of others.

Dialog in this context can be understood as
a process of exchange between different ac-
tors of society that aims to enhance mutual
understanding and trust. Dialog is often
needed to prepare for, or to deepen nego-
tiations, or to build trust and understand-
ing once an agreement has been reached.
Negotiation goes beyond dialog as it also
aims at concrete results and involves inter-
dependent decision making. Negotiation,
therefore, lies at the heart of a consensus-
based approach to SSR. Mediation or fa-
cilitation (i.e. a softer and less formalized
form of mediation), finally, can be under-
stood as assisted negotiations, where an
 impartial, acceptable third party supports
negotiation actors in shaping a process to
reach a mutually acceptable agreement. The
idea is that the mediator or facilitator sup-
ports the process, but the content of the ne-
gotiations is decided on by the involved
parties, thereby respecting their decision-
making autonomy. A third party who dic-
tates the content of an agreement is not a
mediator. Dialog, negotiation and media-
tion have thus become increasingly impor-
tant means in implementing SSR.

Cases of Consensus-oriented SSR

The Burundi Peace Process between 1998
and 2000 provides an interesting example

Swiss SSR Activities

Many Swiss government agencies are
involved in SSR activities. One example is the
SSR capacity building initiative in South
Sudan involving SSR experts from the Swiss
Federal Department of Defence, Civil
Protection and Sport. Another example is the
support of the Swiss Federal Department of
Foreign Affairs and the CSS ETH to the
Zimbabwe Peace and Security Program for
capacity building workshops.

The Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control
of Armed Forces (DCAF), initiated by the
Swiss Confederation in 2000, is one of the
global leading actors in the field of SSR. With
more than 140 staff and an annual budget of
of about 35 million CHF (half of which is
covered by the Swiss Government), it is
involved in SSR policy, consultancy, research
and training across the globe.
SSR Further Reading


for mediation of SSR in the very early stages of the transition from war to peace. Mediated by Julius Nyerere, former Tanzanian Head of State, and later on by Nelson Mandela, former South African Head of State, the mediation process was supported by different international experts and helped to balance the Hutu – Tutsi ethnic representation of the previously Tutsi-dominated army across the rank and file. Clearly, the peace agreement did not solve all of Burundi’s problems – as demonstrated by the recent troubles since 2015 – but it did put an end to the waves of violence which had occurred before the agreement, where hundreds of thousands of people were killed.

The Philippines provides an illuminating example of a civil society-led SSR initiative that developed in parallel to other efforts in the long transition from war (in certain parts of the country) to peace. Bantay Bayanihan was created in 2011 and brings together civil society and state security actors. The idea is to improve relations and discuss security challenges, as well as to serve as a joint, independent oversight mechanism to monitor security sector performance in the country. Bantay Bayanihan functions as a nation-wide network, but there are also local platforms where communities can meet and discuss with their local security forces and local government. There are indications that the network has helped to increase understanding and trust between civil society and the military and that this has contributed to a decrease in human rights violations.

In Zimbabwe, another locally-owned approach to SSR can be found that illustrates the use of dialog much further down the process in the transition from war to peace. Initiated in 2009 (thus 30 years after the war of independence), local actors from different political backgrounds established the Zimbabwe Peace and Security Programme (ZPSP), which aims to “contribute, through the provision of impartial and professional technical assistance, to effective and sustainable modernization and transformation of the security sector in order to enhance the democratic governance, security and the national sovereignty of the people of Zimbabwe.” Workshops are organized that combine dialog platforms between actors from different sectors (e.g. women, traditional leaders, NGOs, governmental actors), with technical capacity building, so that knowledge and consensus about security sector issues are developed. In the Zimbabwean context, the term “Security Sector Transformation” is used instead of SSR, which is associated in Zimbabwe with external efforts at “regime change”. Moreover, the term “transformation” is preferred because it emphasizes both process and institutional transformation. Whilst ZPSP has yet to achieve the fully fledged security sector transformation process it seeks, it has managed to place the issues on the agenda of public discourse, established a genuine dialog and created buy-in from increasing numbers of both state and non-state actors.

These types of processes deal with many of the challenges of SSR processes outlined above, placing special emphasis on the early phases and preparation of SSR. Ideally, they are also nationally funded. In post-conflict cases where this is not feasible, experience shows that the Southern actors need to be in the lead when designing the SSR process, but that they also need to clarify the logic and process design to their Northern donors.

Reorientation of Donors

The failure of externally imposed, standardized SSR programs has led to a gradual awakening on the side of the international donor community. Instead of calling for quick results, donors are starting to focus on negotiated SSR processes. If an international mediator is required due to the high escalation and polarization in the country, the mediator needs to be acceptable to the negotiators and they must maintain full control over the content of their agreement. In post-conflict contexts, national and local stakeholders need to initiate their own SSR programs with donors rethinking their role as one of support only. Key stakeholders in a society need to give their consent for SSR. This is often clarified and developed in a process guided by local teams of facilitators that cross conflict lines in order to maintain impartiality. By combining dialog and negotiation with technical capacity building, the technical-political nature of SSR can be bridged.

Increasingly, international donors, for example the EU and Switzerland, are ready to support such negotiated approaches to SSR, for the simple reason that there are no viable alternatives. Negotiated SSR processes bear the hope that the enhancement of effective and accountable security for a state and its people can actually be put into practice – even if not quickly, at least in a locally legitimized and sustainable manner.

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