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Toward People-Centered Security Sectors In Africa: A Tale Of Missed Opportunities?

by Marta Martinelli

In Brief: Most of the international security agenda is determined in the loosely defined "Global North" and is implemented in the "Global South." This trend needs to be inverted with more voices from the "South" included in debates that shape international security policies and practices. In the case of Africa, it is important to consider questions of security governance on the continent and the role that civilian actors can play in promoting it. The role that civil society, media, and parliaments can play is essential in ensuring security forces have a positive role in strengthening the overall governance environment in Africa. While it is hard to single out one factor responsible for the unsustainability of many SSR initiatives in Africa, the exclusion of civil society voices from policy and professional debates on security provision results in little buy-in and support for donor-driven initiatives and a permanent hiatus between the population and a key part of the state apparatus.

Introduction

Debates about security policies in Africa are often associated with perceptions of apocalyptic civil wars and conflicts that seem endemic and unmanageable to external observers, and certainly beyond the remit of civil society organizations to tackle. Yet security is about more than war and armed conflict and affects more than the border of the state or its institutions. In fact, the ideal of a strong central state with a legitimate monopoly on violence does not always hold true in Africa and ignores the challenges posed by the actual practices of security and political order on the continent, where local actors and informal governance arrangements often compete with the state in the provision of security and may even be a source of insecurity. In several African countries, this is compounded by counter-terrorism, public-health, or stabilization policies and practices that favor the expansion of the military's power while shielding it from civilian scrutiny. Examples include the extraordinary powers bestowed on the Kenyan Anti-Terrorism Police Unit; the deployment of militaries during the Ebola health crisis in Liberia; and the South African use of military units to manage the latest bouts of xenophobic violence in April 2015 and its militarized response to phenomena of migration and discrimination practices.

The militarization of public policies is a global phenomenon testified in widely different contexts such as by the pervasive presence of the military in the Egyptian economy; the militarization of the police and civic protest management and control in the United States and in Latin America; the blurring of military and police mandates in Indonesia; and so on. Yet, in an environment of weak security governance and poor oversight institutions, as is often the case in Africa, security actors tend to take on more prominent roles whilst oversight mechanisms and civil society tend to lack the capacity to contrast such trends.

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Security institutions per se do not *determine* the parameters of good governance and the policies necessary to its implementation: these are decided by civilian and political authorities, to which security actors are, in principle, subjected. However, given that they contribute significantly to the weak political and economic governance in Africa, it is important to consider questions of security governance on the continent and the role that civilian actors can play in promoting it. A better understanding of this potential role must be situated in the context of decades of international assistance to reform security sectors in Africa on one hand, and decades of corrosive relations between the state and its population as well as deeply held distrust between security actors and civil society on the other.

Security Sector Reform or Security Sector Governance? Missed Opportunities in International Assistance

During the late 1990s, the donor community began to realize that "there is no peace without development and no development without peace." That realization led to a closer link between development actors and security institutions as well as a more blurred distinction between the policies implemented in both fields. The development-security nexus became exemplified in the notion of security sector reform (SSR), which assumes that an unreformed security sector represents a critical obstacle to the promotion of sustainable development and peace.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has played a significant role in guiding public donors' thinking on SSR. Key OECD policy documents include *The DAC Guidelines: Helping Prevent Violent Conflict* (2001)[1] and *Security System Reform and Governance: Policy and Good Practice* (2004).[2] In 2005, OECD donors engaged in the elaboration of standards for official development assistance (ODA) to include SSR elements like security expenditure management, the role of civil society in the security sector, civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and conflict resolution, legislation regarding child soldiers, and control of small arms and light weapons (SALW).[3] Donors agreed that any SSR initiative that includes democratic governance and civilian control of military and security practices is ODA-eligible. In 2007, an

1 *The DAC Guidelines: Helping Prevent Violent Conflict* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, November 2001), http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/helping-prevent-violent-conflict_9789264194786-en.

2 "Security System Reform and Governance: Policy and Good Practice," *OECD Policy Brief* (May 2004), https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/11472/uploads.

3 *DAC Guidelines and Reference Series: Security System Reform and Governance* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2005), https://www.oecd.org/dac/governance-peace/conflictfragilityandresilience/docs/31785288.pdf.

operational handbook on SSR[4] was officially endorsed by DAC ministers and heads of agency and was later integrated with a chapter on gender awareness and one on monitoring and evaluation in 2009. The DAC Guidelines and SSR Handbook have contributed to the development of related policy frameworks, including various bilateral donors' SSR strategies, the European Union Concept Papers on SSR (2005 and 2006),[5] the first United Nations Secretary General's Report on SSR, and the UN comprehensive approach to security sector reform (2008).[6]

Since the emergence of SSR as a policy concept, more than 15 years of programming in the area of security sector reform has shed light on a number of trends and lessons:

1. Focusing on state capacity and institutions remains a central preoccupation of SSR efforts, which is also a crucial factor in the success or failure of broader peacebuilding. State security and a few institutions that are considered key to it are the main focus of assistance initiatives: the armed forces, the police, the judiciary and, to a lesser degree, financial management bodies, parliaments, and civil society organizations. In this approach, although human security is considered, it is less of a concern.

2. SSR in its original formulation is aimed at overcoming both security and accountability deficits. It involves the consolidation of an affordable, efficient, and effective security apparatus under state control, to reduce both security deficits and democratic deficits. In its normative aspect, SSR is intended to ensure that security forces are constrained by and operate within a framework of democratic governance and civilian oversight mechanisms. In reality, donors have tended to focus on "train and equip" and the technical aspects of security sector reform rather than on governance. In addition, support for institutional reform (targeted at ministries of defense or homeland security, the police, or the justice sector) has been based on ideal-type models derived from Western liberal democracies, to the detriment of local accountability mechanisms, civil society, and parliaments.

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3. SSR is a long-term enterprise measured in years and decades rather than short-term programmatic cycles. It also is an eminently political exercise as it implies a redefinition of power relations in several ways: a) between government and armed groups; b) between security agencies such as the army, police, intelligence services, and to some extent the justice sector, as well as within departments; c) between civilians and the military; and d) between state and society. Yet donors' assistance has generally taken an apolitical approach. Moreover, donors tend to compete to earn the confidence of assisted governments' administrations in order to gain an entry point. At stake are influence, financial survival of defense agencies of donor countries, visibility and credibility in foreign policy, and the right to "legitimately interfere" with the most exclusive of

4 *OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform: Supporting Security and Justice* (Paris, France: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, February 2008), http://www.oecd.org/governance/governance-peace/conflictandfragility/oecddachandbookonsecuritysystemreformsupportingsecurityandjustice.htm.

5 *EU Concept for ESDP Support to Security Sector Reform (SSR)* (Brussels, Belgium: European Council, October 2005), http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2012566%202005%20REV%204; and *A Concept for European Community Support for Security Sector Reform* (Brussels, Belgium: European Commission, May 2006), http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52006DC0253&from=EN.

6 *Securing Peace and Development: The Role of the United Nations in Supporting Security Sector Reform*, UN General Assembly A/62/659 (New York, NY: United Nations, January 2008), http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2008/39.

sovereign functions: defense, intelligence, police, territorial and population control, economic transactions, etc.

4. This leads to lack of coordination between donors, but also within their own institutions. For instance, defense, home security, and development department initiatives are often uncoordinated. Lack of coordination is also evident across policy areas such as SSR and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), or across SSR and justice reforms. Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands have innovated in this area by creating inter-ministerial funding and consultation mechanisms.

One key obstacle for effective and sustainable reforms in the security sector is that SSR is often viewed as a concept imposed by foreigners.

5. SSR efforts tend to be externally induced. In most cases, external actors initiate SSR programs, fund them, and provide the bulk of the expertise required for implementation. They tend to promote reform models that rarely fit with the context on the ground and create tensions between external imposition and local ownership. One key obstacle for effective and sustainable reforms in the security sector is that SSR is often viewed as a concept imposed by foreigners. Timothy Donais,[7] a prominent scholar who has been researching issues of ownership and peace-building for several years, suggests that ownership can be understood in two ways: 1) as the buy-in or acceptance by the local population of the unquestioned "wisdom" of imported Western approaches to security governance; or 2) as "authorship," where solutions are designed from within local communities and external help is limited to nurturing opportunities for them to surface. For the latter, facilitation, rather than attempts to socially engineer change, are more effective. However, ownership also needs to be problematized through a realistic assessment of the "owners," their representativeness, and the inclusiveness of reform processes, which are not easy to realize on the ground.

The experience of implementing security sector reform programs in Africa suggests that the SSR agenda is underpinned by a view of the state driven by the "Global North," where well-functioning institutions are central to both the health of the state as an apparatus and its ability to deliver to the needs of its people. The reality on the ground is very far from that ideal view and this partially explains the resistance of both local elites and populations to externally induced security sector reform projects. In addition, international security sector reform initiatives have been disproportionately focused on technical approaches neglecting support for democratic accountability and civil society. Where this has taken place, it has proved to be non-strategic and unsustainable, failing to connect with the aspirations of local communities that struggle to define the role of the state in Africa and whose social, economic, and political conditions may be very far from ideal models.

The Enduring Legacy of Civil-Military Relations in Africa and New Challenges

To understand how civil society engages or not with security institutions, policies, and actors in Africa, it is important to understand the context of civil-military relations on the continent since they shape the possibilities for partnerships.

7 Timothy Donais, "Inclusion or Exclusion? Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform," *Studies in Social Justice,* vol. 3, no. 1 (2009): 117-131. See also, Timothy Donais "Understanding Local Ownership in Security Sector Reform," in Donais (ed.), *Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform* (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2008), 3-17.

Most sub-Saharan African countries possess constitutional provisions that regulate the functions of the armed forces and the role of oversight mechanisms such as defense parliamentary committees, public accounts committees, and internal audits and services regulations. In addition, African regional organizations, such as the Africa Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have also developed comprehensive policies to regulate the security sector.

However, implementation at the national level is scant and ineffective. Historically, the liberation struggles that have taken place on African soil have resulted in a strong relationship of shared values between political and military leaderships. Subsequent struggles by armed militias to contest the ruling power have resulted in the direct allocation of government power to the winning factions and their representatives. The sub-Saharan African state is thus characterized by high militarization of the state. Security agencies, including the police and intelligence, are either directly drawn from previously warring factions or, when constituted on a national basis, are deeply interconnected with the political elites. Some examples of the negative consequences of such close relationships are found in Uganda, where the military directly nominates some members of parliament, or in Malawi, Côte d'Ivoire, and Zimbabwe where former Presidents Hastings Kamuzu Banda and Laurent Gbagbo, and current President Robert Mugabe, respectively, encouraged setting up paramilitary structures to support the ruling party during their time in office. At the local level, village administrations can also be militarized, with local authorities drawn from military or police ranks.

Many ruling authorities in Africa have not traditionally been concerned with the provision of security as a service that extends to all citizens, going beyond the protection of the state and its officials. In addition, security forces rarely understand their role to be in defense of the state's constitution or other foundational principles. Political and military leaders often enjoy very close relations. This ensures the loyalty of military and police actors in case of political turmoil, so military actors tend to defend the government of the moment. The roles of the military, police, and justice sector are mostly defined in terms of defending the interests and assets of the ruling elite on which they depend and to which they are ultimately accountable. Frequent shifts within the armed forces, recruitment from selected ethnic groups and favoring one service over the other (as is often the case with presidential guards) leads to inter-service rivalries, mutinies, general inefficiencies, and lack of legitimacy such that the relationship between state security actors and the broader population is severely compromised. The Central Africa Republic, with its repeated violent changes of power and chronic misuse of security forces, is a glaring example of these tendencies.

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Another case in point is the attempted military coup in Burundi in 2015, which resulted from the protests against President Pierre Nkurunziza's manipulation of the electoral contest to remain in power for a third mandate. The coup showed that the army was split between supporters of the Constitution and supporters of the president. The police, heavily biased in favor of the president, played a repressive role during and after the failed coup, in spite of years and millions of dollars in SSR assistance spent by international donors (the Netherlands, France, Belgium, and the UN, in particular).

New challenges are also shaping the security environment in Africa, which affects relations between security forces and citizens. That some African cities are experiencing an upsurge in urban crime underscores the importance of national police forces. However, these are generally underfunded, ill-trained for policing functions, generally disinterested in the poor, and corrupt, all of which undermine trust and respect for security institutions. Post-conflict African states experience an ongoing lack of adequate capacity and resources for police. Moreover, demobilized militias or retiring army and police personnel that lack opportunities in the labor market end up inflating a blossoming industry of private security providers, which are often insufficiently regulated. Finally, growing terrorist threats and associated counter-terrorism initiatives further diminish accountability and restrict the space for meaningful civil society engagement.

The Role of Civil Society in Promoting Effective Security Sector Governance in Africa

Democratic and accountable governance of the security sector is an inclusive concept not limited to the role played by parliaments and the judiciary. It extends to interested citizens, particularly civil society organizations, that participate in defining security priorities and policies as well as in their implementation and monitoring. Different from parliamentary oversight (which is also an important element of it), democratic accountability of the security sector requires the engagement of an informed civil society, including faith and women's groups, the media, academia, etc., so that they can contribute to debates over security policies, legislation, and budgeting. A lack of civilian and democratic oversight of the security sector enables corruption and impunity, turning security actors into tools for oppression. Conversely, effective oversight of security institutions is a fundamental element of consolidating democracy.

Civil society can contribute to effective and accountable security sectors by providing evidence-based information on the security needs of communities to decision-makers and by evaluating the security situation through defining threats and challenges. It can contribute to policy development through research, advocacy, and technical assistance. It can also help monitor and evaluate policies and service delivery; in some cases, it can even provide services to security forces such as developing and delivering trainings. In addition, a crucial civil society function is to facilitate dialogue between communities and security institutions, thus contributing to violence-prevention strategies.

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However, organizations that monitor public policies and government officials (commonly referred to as "watchdogs") in African countries have not been able to exercise their role in effective ways, where they exist at all. Parliaments may not have the explicit legal authority to review and approve security sector leadership appointments. Even those that are legally empowered to do so may lack sufficient staff to assess the integrity and merits of candidates; they may also lack capacity to meaningfully review government expenditures in the security sector and assess budgetary proposals.

Generally speaking, civilians around the world tend to believe that security matters are better dealt with by a restricted group of political leaders and professional security actors. This is true also in Africa where civil society mostly lacks the knowledge to understand and interpret security matters as well as to interface in a meaningful way with security actors (with the exception of a few notable examples such as the CLEEN Foundation and the National Human Rights Commission in Nigeria, the Africa Security Sector Network, the South African Institute for Security Studies [ISS], the Africa Policing Civilian Oversight Forum, and the West Africa

Network for Peacebuilding [WANEP]). Compared to other areas of public policy like health, education, or transportation, where information is more accessible, African civil society starts from a situation of acute knowledge deprivation in the area of security, lacks the confidence to engage in organized advocacy (in part due to fear), and is in dire need of technical capacity.

These limitations have significant consequences on the governance of the security sector, shielding it from public scrutiny while civil society simultaneously fails to recognize the important public role played by the military and other security forces. This makes it harder to articulate human rights and good governance concerns in the formulation of security policies.

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If it is true that civil society initiatives in the security sector are a neglected dimension of security sector reform and struggle to have a systemic impact in Africa, it is also true that there are some notable examples of civic engagement with direct results. For instance, in Guinea, the Mano River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) is among the most active civil society organizations working to mobilize citizens on issues of security governance and conflict prevention. It conducts advocacy and awareness-raising initiatives around international conventions, including by establishing and training a network of traditional communicators in Guinea and promoting a culture of peace in schools and through rural radio stations.[8] Also in Guinea, civil society and the Ministry for Security and Civil Protection have collaborated to bring together police officers and journalists to raise awareness in the media of the ongoing police reform efforts, discuss relationships between police and the media as well as how the media covers crime.[9]

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the civil society Network for Security Sector Reform (based in Kinshasa and with 11 provincial offices) regularly monitors the behavior of both police and military actors and denounces abuses; it contributes to building the capacity of other civil society organizations (such as women and human rights groups) by teaching them about security laws and policies and by organizing awareness-building events with local communities; it monitors the implementation of the Addis Peace Agreement, including its provisions on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, as well as SSR provisions, regularly reporting its observations on a dedicated website; and it conducts advocacy to improve security policies.

In Mali, the Forum for Democratic Discussion (*l'Espace d'Interpellation Démocratique*) organizes a yearly convening of citizens and governmental representatives, and also links up to the national ombudsman institution (the Mediator of the Republic) to review cases of public service misuse in general. Human rights organizations also participate in the Forum, which has also become an entry point to discuss dysfunction in the security sector and is now an institutional framework through which civil society supports government to accelerate the operationalization of the National Council for SSR.

Strengthening African Oversight Capacity for Effective Security Sector Governance in Africa

International initiatives to support African societies in reforming their security sectors have mostly failed to achieve their goal of developing democratically governed security sectors under civilian leadership, and they have generally neglected to invest in democratic oversight capacities, particularly of civil society. These two dimensions assume a whole new relevance in light

8 Augustin Loada and Ornella Moderan, *Civil Society Involvement in Security Sector Reform and Governance* (Geneva: DCAF, 2015), 27, http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/Tool-6-Civil-Society-Involvement-in-Security-Sector-Reform-and-Governance.

9 Ibid., 43.

of the new threats that affect the African continent and the restrictive environment created by counter-terrorism practices that is already providing fertile ground to reinforce authoritarian practices by the state.

In order to improve this situation going forward, some concrete suggestions and areas of intervention include:

- Strengthening constitutional and legal frameworks that define the roles and mandates of security forces, the selection of security actors and appointment of their leadership, and the legal obligations and responsibilities of individual servicemen/women. Concretely, from the perspective of foreign assistance, this means providing technical assistance to assess legal frameworks; support capacity-building for legislators; and support public outreach and awareness of regulatory frameworks. Working with the judiciary and the administrative apparatus that supports it is a priority in this regard.

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- Strengthening the role and capacity of civil society to participate in and monitor security debates and policy formulation, including through advocacy and consultations; the inclusion of marginalized groups (such as ethnic minorities whose rights are actively undermined by security forces); confidence-building exercises involving the media, municipal authorities, and law enforcement representatives; familiarizing civil society organizations with existing national security policies, laws, and regulations of the security sector; and supporting civil society to undertake outreach and awareness-building programs. In addition, civil society could be supported to identify institutional points of contact and liaison offices to gain direct access to the security sector.

- Strengthening independent oversight institutions and mechanisms such as parliaments, national human rights commissions, anti-corruption bodies, and the judiciary (particularly the military justice system). Parliaments could be helped to develop specialized committees (such as for the oversight of intelligence services); adopt gender-sensitive laws that regulate the security sector; audit defense budgets; and so on. Technical assistance and research/analysis capacity could also be offered to parliaments and their staff. Parliaments can be encouraged to benefit from the expertise present in civil society organizations to contribute to parliamentary investigations, questions, and specialized hearings.

Additional initiatives could include the development of regional lessons-learned exercises, cross-country network building, facilitating encounters between donors and prospective grantees, and identifying convening spaces for civilians and military personnel. In addition, certain services within the police, the penitentiary services, and the army (such as the General Auditor and the national service for civic education), could also be engaged to improve relations with the population or the disciplinary standards of the armed forces.

Support to individual organizations is important at the national level but can result in knowledge being exclusive to a few chosen individuals, with little systemic impact. This can be addressed with programs that specifically act as multipliers and with network organizations and institutions at the national and regional levels.

One last word concerns the need to further develop and promote independent evidence-gathering and research that is produced at the local level and that contributes to conveying information on good and bad practices of donors' interventions to reform security sectors. Most of the international security agenda is determined in the loosely defined "Global North" and is implemented in the "Global South." This trend needs to be inverted with more voices from the "South" included in debates that shape international security policies and practices. More investment is thus required in knowledge-production and -sharing, with a determined effort to support scholars and researchers from Africa and make available such knowledge to civil society organizations that can operationalize it to respond to local needs.

Conclusion

Security Sector Reform in Africa and elsewhere is at a crossroads after decades of programming that have produced, at best, mixed results. Many such programs take place in post-authoritarian or post-conflict countries with little experience of participatory governance and democratic participation. It is thus very difficult to achieve inclusive security policies that channel the interests, needs, and aspirations of all sectors of society. This is true in other contexts too, but in Africa it is compounded by historical legacies that affect the mindset of security forces to protect their leaders rather than offering protection to the whole population. The role that civil society, media, and parliaments can play is essential in ensuring security forces have a positive role in strengthening the overall governance environment in Africa. While it is hard to single out one factor responsible for the unsustainability of many SSR initiatives in Africa, the exclusion of civil society voices from policy and professional debates on security provision results in little buy-in and support for donor-driven initiatives and a permanent hiatus between the population and a key part of the state apparatus. As policy communities reflect on the achievements of SSR initiatives and consider how to address ongoing challenges, bringing back to the fore the normative and governance dimensions of security sector reform should take priority over purely "train and equip" or technical approaches, including by improving participation at all levels of security policy formulation.

About the Author

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