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DIIS Brief

Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform and the Challenge of Ownership - The Case of Liberia

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Security Sector Reform has become a pivotal part of international peacebuilding efforts. Donor agencies and Western government are devoting substantial resources to strengthen the legitimacy and efficiency of war-torn societies' security systems. At the same time, it is commonly accepted that lasting solutions cannot be imposed on societies. In order to be sustained, reforms must be locally owned.

Based on an outline of the concept of Security Sector Reform and a presentation of two different approaches to ownership, the brief discusses the ongoing SSR-process in Liberia in view of the recent shift from a transitional to a democratically elected government. It identifies dilemmas between the current SSR-agenda and the objective of ownership, and argues that a more inclusive and less state-centred approach is needed.

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Introduction

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is vital to conflict transformation. In post-conflict societies, there is a pressing need to strengthen the legitimacy and efficiency of the security institutions in order to establish law and order and lay the foundations for lasting peace. Sustainable solutions to this cannot be imposed upon societies. The people of the war-torn country – who are going to sustain the results – must be actively involved in the process. Local ownership is pivotal for lasting changes. Often, however, international efforts rely on a preconceived SSR-model that focuses exclusively on the formal state institutions. In fragile states, this model may run counter to the objective of ensuring local ownership.

In fragile post-conflict states the formal institutions have little capacity and – especially with regard to the security sector – low legitimacy. A clear national identity is lacking, the population remains divided and distrustful and often an international peacekeeping force is needed to maintain a ceasefire or peace agreement. The situation is best described as no-peace/no-war. On the one hand, this highlights the timeliness of changes in the security structure of the society. On the other, it underlines that successful reforms are not a matter of technicalities but a political process which ultimately hinges on overcoming crises of trust and credibility.

This brief will:

- Outline the concept of Security Sector Reform.
- Present two different approaches to ownership.
- Discuss the ongoing SSR-process in Liberia in view of the recent shift from a transitional to a democratically elected government.¹
- Identify dilemmas between the SSR-agenda and the objective of ownership.

Security Sector Reform

SSR is part of a wider peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction agenda. It emphasises democracy, good governance and human rights and goes beyond state-centric notions of security. It is concerned with human security, yet holds that human

¹ This part of the brief is informed by interviews with representatives from the Government of Liberia, the Liberian Legislature, Liberian civil society organisations, the US Embassy, UNMIL, ECOWAS and other Liberian and international observers. The interviews were conducted during a visit to Monrovia, 2-9 May 2006, financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

security and state security are mutually reinforcing. The provision of security is the responsibility of the state. The objective of SSR is to reform and revitalise the state's security institutions and ensure that they provide security in accordance with democratic norms, good governance and human rights. In post-conflict situations, this includes dismantling rivaling armed forces by integrating them into a unified national army and/or convincing them to lay down arms through programmes of demobilisation, demilitarisation and re-integration (DDR).

SSR aims at enhancing both the efficiency and the legitimacy of the security sector. Legitimacy is primarily related to issues of governance and human rights, while efficiency reflects the actual provision of security. The borders between legitimacy and efficiency are blurred and can be difficult to uphold in practice. Training police officers in human-rights-based riot control is a case in point.

The SSR concept and terminology are still not widely known outside the OECD countries and the primary impetus for post-conflict SSR tends to be external.

Ownership

Policy makers, practitioners and academics agree that sustainable and legitimate changes cannot be imposed on a society. The centrality of ownership is beyond dispute. Ownership has become a signal of good intentions. Ownership is good. It is the opposite of imposed solutions and externally driven processes, which are bad. Emphasis is on how to ensure or enhance ownership, while less attention is paid to clarifying what it means and who the owners are. To discuss this, it is useful to distinguish between two different approaches.

The first approach equates ownership with giving primary responsibility to the government. This approach is *state-centred*. The government is the main partner for international agencies, and activities focus on strengthening state institutions such as ministries, legislature, judiciary, police, and army. These are the main stakeholders whose commitment is deemed crucial to success. It is with them that ownership should rest. This is by far the most common understanding of ownership. It is formulated by international agencies and donor governments and applied in 'ordinary' development assistance as well as in peacebuilding and conflict prevention efforts, including SSR.

In contrast, the *society-centred* approach emphasises the informal institutions, which – especially in fragile post-conflict states – play a huge role in everyday politics and security.

The basic argument is that by focusing exclusively on the formal state, the international community may render its own assistance irrelevant. People continue to rely on the resilient informal structures and coping mechanisms which determined politics and facilitated survival and conflict resolution both before and during the war. Ignoring these institutions is done at the peril of the chances for lasting peace. Some of them – even when based on divisive categories such as ethnicity, clan, or religion – could be important building blocks for a peaceful post-conflict order.

Elements from state- and society-centred approaches can be combined. The emphasis placed on involving civil society in an otherwise state-centred SSR process is an example. Often, however, civil society is defined in a way that excludes e.g. clan-based institutions and thus ignores a pivotal element in society. More even-handed combinations are found in attempts at bridging customary and formal law. The state-centred approach remains, however, dominant. Non-state actors/civil society are primarily seen as ‘watch dogs’ that fulfil oversight functions for the state. Not as owners.

Security Sector Reform in Liberia

For 14 years, Liberia was engulfed in a devastating civil war that destroyed the country's already limited infrastructure, killed an estimated 200,000 people and displaced 1/3 of the population. The signing in 2003 of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) introduced a fragile peace, which remains upheld by 15,000 UN soldiers – the world's second-largest UN peace operation.

The CPA established a National Transitional Government (NTGL). Following elections in October 2005, executive power was handed over to a democratically elected president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, in January 2006. The new government has set forth a 150 Day Plan of Action which in terms of security promises to:

- Build a credible, capable and democratically accountable military force
- Strengthen national security institutions and enhance coordination
- Strengthen the National Police Force.

This builds upon the CPA and continues the SSR-process initiated during the transitional government. The backdrop for SSR, however, goes beyond the civil war. Throughout Liberia's history, the practice of the state and its armed forces has run counter to notions of

human security and democratic governance. At each point in history, the security forces of the state have been instruments of fear and oppression. The task at hand is thus – according to a senior officer at the Ministry of Defence – nothing less than to install a whole new ideology that lives up to the best international standards.

Ownership during Transition

The CPA defined the objectives and scope of the reform process and served as the entry point for international involvement. Compared to the broad SSR-agenda found in donor policies, the CPA is narrower. It provides for a DDR-program and for restructuring and reforming the armed forces, the national police, and other state security agencies², but has no articles on strengthening civilian oversight. The need for ‘sensitising’ the Liberian public to the mission and activities of the restructuring plan is mentioned, but such programs were never established, as the donors and the National Transitional Government of Liberia (NTGL) failed to agree on the funding. Civil society and political parties participated in the CPA, but were not included in the Military Advisory Committee established afterwards to advise the NTGL on the restructuring of the armed forces. Membership was limited to the chiefs of staff of the warring parties. In the transitional period, Liberian ‘ownership’ was primarily a matter for the NTGL and the warring parties of which it was made up.

Strongly supported by the UN and the World Bank, the NTGL formulated a results-oriented transition strategy. Progress was achieved – especially on demobilisation and police reforms – but by the end of the transition period in December 2005, the strategy was not fulfilled. The UN Secretary General informed the Security Council that he was particularly concerned about the uncompleted tasks of security-sector reform. The shortcomings reflected both a lack of donor funds and a lack of political will from the transitional government.

‘Lack of political will’ indicates ownership problems. The warring parties had committed themselves to SSR in the CPA but had apparently little interest in the actual reforms. Today, a senior member of the NTGL holds that this was a political miscalculation: The interests of the different warring parties would have been better safeguarded, had they engaged more seriously in restructuring the army. The decision to build the new Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) from scratch instead of drawing on people with military experience is mentioned as an example.

Despite the lack of political will/ownership, decisions were nevertheless taken. The process was driven forward by the international community, most notably UNMIL and USA. A year

² In the following, emphasis is mainly on the reforms of the armed forces.

after the signing of the CPA, Liberians – public officials and civil society alike – complained that the international community had failed to emphasise local ownership and had exaggerated the ‘brain-drain problem’ – international partners relied too much on foreign experts instead of listening to knowledgeable Liberians.

Similar statements are made in Monrovia today by people in the Administration, the Legislature and civil society organisations, which see a need for ‘Liberianising’ the process. In particular, the US support to AFL restructuring is criticised for being foreign-led and lacking transparency – especially concerning the two private contractors assigned to carry out the operational tasks.³ The decision to outsource was taken unilaterally by the US government, and the contracts are considered internal US government papers. Many see this as an obstacle to stronger Liberian ownership.

Ownership and Democracy?

The transfer of formal authority from the NGTL to a democratically elected government provides a window of opportunity to approach the issue of ownership afresh. In principle, two types of changes are possible: An increase in the level of government ownership and a shift towards a more society-centred approach. The two are not mutually exclusive: The Johnson-Sirleaf administration could lead the process more adamantly – while simultaneously expanding the group of ‘stakeholders’ beyond the formal state institutions and move towards a more society-based ownership approach.

Judging from the first months of the new Administration, the political will to pursue SSR seems to be present. The main obstacle to stronger government ownership is likely to be lack of capacity. Heavy reliance on funds and technical assistance from international partners will persist under the new government. Nevertheless, the government is trying to Liberianise the SSR-process by guiding its international partners to ensure that the program meets the needs of the Liberian society.

The government has initiated a national security review, which will feed into the formulation of a national security strategy. Donors emphasise such wider policy visions as pivotal to enhancing ownership. The bulk of the Liberian review was undertaken by the RAND Corporation (financed by the US). RAND delivered their final report to the President in May 2006 and the Government is currently reflecting on how to proceed. The content of the report remains confidential, but is known to recommend that the security strategy (not the review) is

³ DynCorp has a three-year contract to ‘do the people’ – i.e. retiring the old AFL and recruiting and training the new soldiers, while PAE (Pacific Architects and Engineering) has been charged with the physical rehabilitation and upgrading of two army bases.

discussed with the Legislature and civil society in order to achieve national consensus. Indications suggest that this is the path the Government will take, yet at the time of writing their plans were neither public, nor clear.

The level of public involvement in the formulation of the national security strategy may indicate how far beyond the Executive Mansion the new government wishes to expand SSR-ownership. Both within the Legislature and among civil society organisations there is a desire to participate.

The House of Representatives has summoned the Minister of Defence to provide detailed information of the reform process, including the financial aspects, but members still claim they are not provided with sufficient and relevant information to fulfil their oversight function.⁴ 81 civil society organisations have called on the Government to establish an 'Independent Technical Advisory Committee on Security Sector Reform' with representatives from the Government, international partners and civil society. The petition has been received by the President who has asked her National Security Advisor and the head of the Special Security Service to meet with the organisations. The meeting has yet to take place.

Involving the Legislature and Monrovia-based civil society organisations does not in itself entail a shift towards a more society-centred approach. It may increase civilian and parliamentary oversight and help break down the 'Imperial Presidency', which President Johnson-Sirleaf has promised to put an end to. But it does not address the risk that the reforms will fail, because they do not include the institutions in society that really matter.

The magnitude of this risk is difficult to assess. Little is known on the current shape and strength of informal institutions in present-day Liberia. It is often argued that the country's social fabric was destroyed by the war – adding societal collapse to state collapse. According to the Liberian political scientist Amos Sawyer,⁵ some institutions adapted and remained crucial to community survival and conflict resolution and could become important building blocks for post-conflict governance. He argues that "the challenge of attaining lasting peace in Liberia can best be met by constituting self-governing institutional arrangements rather than reconstituting the over-centralized state."

⁴ The fault is also seen to lie with Liberia's international partners, who do not provide funding through the national budget.

⁵ Sawyer served as Liberian interim President 1990-1993. He is currently chairing the Governance Reform Commission and considered a highly influential individual.

If the Johnson-Sirleaf administration listens to Sawyer's advice, it will move towards a more society-based approach to ownership. Such a shift would have to be negotiated with the Government's international partners who provide all the funding.

Concluding Remarks

Discussing the meaning of 'ownership' in a situation of extreme poverty and high levels of insecurity can seem beside the point. When the needs are so obvious and the local capacity to address them so evidently overstretched, why not just get on with the work and start laying the foundations for a better future?

While the needs may be obvious, the solutions are not. Consider the restructuring of the Armed Forces of Liberia. The decision that Liberia should have an army of 2,000 soldiers based in Camp Scheffelin at the outskirts of Monrovia was made by the Pentagon, based on a technical review and a projection of what the Liberian government would be able to sustain financially. It did not reflect a new-found national consensus and thus remain contested.

The dilemma is linked to the time factor which is always an issue – especially for development agencies, who are eager to show results to their granting authorities. In Liberia, outsourcing to private contractors may further fuel this tendency, as DynCorp is "burning money every day" regardless of whether or not they are busy recruiting and training soldiers.

While consultation and discussion takes time, it seems evident that human security policy should be informed by the concerns of individuals at risk. Bottom-up perspectives, however, are largely absent from human security research and policy agendas, including SSR. Very little is done to engage the population in SSR and learn about their priorities and perceptions. This is also the case in Liberia

Engaging the population in something as complex and sensitive as SSR is hard. In addition to physical obstacles of illiteracy and infrastructure comes the task of convincing people that they have a legitimate stake in shaping the future security structure of the country. Considering the repressive history of the security forces, motivating people to get involved will be difficult.

In Liberia, neither the government, nor its international partners have so far prioritised this task. If the security needs of both the people and the state are to be addressed simultan-

eously by the security structure currently being crafted, it may be time for a more inclusive approach.

Suggested reading

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