

The delusion of Security Sector Reform “light” and the need for adequate priorities

FriEnt Peacebuilding Forum (pbf-voices-blog/beitraege/?

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By Herbert Wulf, Founding Director, Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC)*

Security Sector Reform (SSR) and one of its components, i.e. ‘train and equip programs’ for security forces in third countries, range among the key instruments of the German government to promote security in conflict affected societies and fragile states. If we look at the debate about SSR which began shortly before the year 2000 in the development community and the realities on the ground, we can observe a polarized situation:

SSR takes place in fragile political settings. Usually, these societies are characterized by four security relevant shortcomings: authoritarian and/or weak governments, insecurity of people in large sectors of society, corrupt security actors and abundance of weapons.

In contrast, the ideal of SSR is the achievement of an effective and efficient provision of state and human security within a framework of democratic governance.



Participants in the FriEnt PBF session on Security Sector Reform

Already ten years ago, the UN Secretary-General argued in a report, that SSR should be people-centered, locally-owned and based on democratic norms, human rights principles and the rule of law. He also underlined that SSR must be developed in adherence to basic governance principles, such as transparency, accountability and other principles of good governance. The German Government’s Guidelines on [Preventing Crises, Resolving Conflicts, Building Peace](#), issued in September 2017 and the Enable and Enhance Initiative (so-called ‘Ertüchtigungsinitiative’) formulate similar goals and want to contribute to the “development of a politically legitimised and accountable security sector which meets professional standards“. And the German Defence Ministry emphasizes the need for prevention of violence and conflict management within SSR.

That is an ambitious agenda, given the typical power struggles in politically contested spaces, such as Mali, Nigeria, Jordan, Tunisia and Iraq – the five countries where most of Germany’s engagement in the Enabling and Enhance initiative are concentrated.

The core of the discussion at the workshop “[Enhancing a part of the problem? The challenges of external support to security actors in politically contested regions](#)” was to come to grips with these gaps between the ideal concepts of SSR and the practices on the ground in some of the target countries. The discussion at the FriEnt Peacebuilding Forum - hosted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Misereor - took place with participation of panellists from the security sector, the international NGO community and three representatives from the German government, as well as participants from different regional and thematic backgrounds.

The key takeaways and recommendations, especially for external actors engaged in SSR, were the following points:

- Many external actors are still too much captured in their own political framework, budgetary restrictions and short time horizons. To ensure serious and sustainable engagement there is a need for fully shared programs between external and host actors.
- Engagements in SSR have to be conducted in a timely fashion. Often early warning signs are ignored and only when a situation has escalated into a violent conflict is the political will strong enough to raise the required resources for SSR. But that might be a difficult moment to initiate a complex SSR program.
- A whole of government strategy is needed to link the different sectorial programs and guide the external engagement towards the achievement of political objectives. SSR and enhancing strategies have to be part and parcel of a long-term and consistent political engagement. External actors have sometimes failed on three different fronts: to coordinate their own efforts (between different government departments), with those of other external actors, and, most importantly, with their hosts.
- 'Hosts' are not a uniform or a coordinated group either. Usually the partners of donor governments are host country governments, who not always represent justified security interests of the local population. SSR programs need to take this dilemma into account.
- A joint conflict analysis of external and host partners and a thorough conflict-assessment are needed before SSR programs are initiated. External actors should not start and conduct their engagement with a set of defined measures and a defined program but listen to the needs expressed by those to be trained.
- SSR and train and equip programs have to be designed in a way that they consistently reflect the political nature of the intervention, that power relations are affected, that privileges are questioned, and traditional relations might be turned upside down.
- To build trust among the local population it is necessary to look into human rights violations during the conflict, be these violators of the national armed forces, UN peacekeepers or non-state armed groups.
- The focus should not be exclusively on state actors and state institutions. Programs to improve the security usually fall short if they address the state security forces (armed forces and police) alone. When the state returned in central Mali, for example, corruption returned as well. Civil society, legitimate community and traditional leaders (like elders, religious leaders etc.) are an important target group especially in countries where the state or state institutions are absent or weak.
- There is a need for small and practical solutions. Such small-scale programs are often below the radar and resources of big donors.
- Democratic oversight and accountability promotion are needed. It is important that only genuine SSR is implemented as a companion to development assistance.
- SSR "light" activities that do not meet human security qualifications will do more harm than good. If SSR and especially train and equip programs are framed and pursued in a purely technical manner it is unlikely that they will contribute to the desired democratic reforms in the security sector and the governance system. Practical experiences of the past have shown the shortcomings of such technical approaches and understandings. It might be better, in certain cases, to refrain from engaging in programs than starting SSR that does not meet the qualification to "do no harm".

What are the prospects and what are the challenges of SSR programs? Three aspects need careful consideration and possibly also require readjustment:

First: Looking at the concrete projects assisted by Germany, it is obvious that their focus has a lot to do with the controversial debate within Germany about refugees and immigration. Both in Tunisia and Niger, the focus of the German assisted program is on border security control, enabling the forces in those two countries to stop refugees on their way to Europe. Certainly, the programs also include all the required catch-words about local ownership, partnership, fighting the causes for migration etc. But are these really the guiding principles when it comes to improving the capabilities of the military and police forces? Are these programs really addressing the core causes for migration?

If SSR and Train and Equip programs ought to contribute to improve security and facilitate development, they should be more than the traditional military assistance programs which did not comply with the concept of security sector reform with a democratically controlled security sector as it is perceived today.

Second: The debate about SSR started two decades ago within the development community. The simple convincing idea was: There will be no development without security and the security sector needs to be reformed to contribute to development, or, at least, not to impede or obstruct development. It is important that SSR is integrated into the broader development concept. But do development issues really matter when SSR programs are designed? Is SSR a tool towards meeting the communities' security needs in development? SSR grew out of the development community, but it was developed within the defense community and also implemented by it. In Germany, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defense are in charge of the enhancing initiative, not the Ministry of Economic Cooperation. A recent meta-study about SSR practices concludes that the SSR-development link is asserted, assumed and taken for granted, but the interdependence of SSR and development still needs to be more convincingly established.

Third: At present, we observe a debate in NATO countries about the need to spend at least two percent of GNP on the armed forces. The two percent aim has become a fetish. The discussion of the armed forces' mission is pushed back as if only money counts. If the defense budget is considerably and continuously increased, as has been promised to ward off the harsh criticism about the free riders in Europe by the US President, we will soon have a Bundeswehr in search of a mission. It should be the other way around. There is a need to discuss how Germany wants to contribute to conflict prevention, peace, security and development. Especially Germany, not the least because of its history, should take over more responsibilities to engage in non-military conflict management. If these priorities are spelled out in detail, the budgetary question will fall in place.

** This text is partly based on a report by Konstantin Bärwaldt (FES) and Elisabeth Strohscheidt (MISEREOR) about the workshop "Enhancing a part of the problem? The challenges of external support to security actors in politically contested regions" at the FriEnt Peacebuilding Forum 2018.*

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