# SSR 2.0 BRIEF

## Security Sector Reform, Legitimate Politics and SDG 16

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SSR practitioners and their national government partners must connect top-down, institutional reform processes with more bottom-up actors, ideas and structures that exist at the community level. If attempting to meet the standards of SDG 16 pushes SSR toward a more meaningful engagement with on the ground realities, its prospects for future success will only be strengthened.

### Abstract:

In spite of a broad international consensus about the desirability of security sector reform (SSR) and its model of implementation, the concept continues to suffer from a relatively poor record of implementation, particularly in challenging environments. Nevertheless, SSR continues to be seen as a lynchpin of international development assistance in fragile and conflict-affected states. It will also play a central role in the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 16, to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."[1]

This brief argues that the inability of SSR to make a sustainable impact at both the national and community level must be addressed in order for it to contribute to the achievement of SDG 16. Too often SSR has been an externally led exercise involving like-minded political elites and failing to account for the complex interplay between actors, programs and processes at the international, national and local level. SDG 16, by contrast, emphasizes legitimate and inclusive political processes at all levels.

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## Introduction

Landmark reports by the UN Secretary-General and UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2151[2] have placed SSR at the heart of the UN peacebuilding, statebuilding and development agenda. The centrality of SSR in the UN's post-2015 development plan is reflected in SDG 16, which aims to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." In many countries, meeting SDG 16 will require reforms to security, justice and governance institutions. In spite of this broad consensus on the overall desirability of SSR and the general model to implement it, SSR has a decidedly spotty record of achievement, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states with challenging reform conditions.

SSR is intended to be a people-centred process guided by democratic principles and chiefly concerned with improving the security of citizens. These ideals set it apart from previous forms of security assistance, which were more concerned with the effectiveness of the security forces and the security of ruling regimes. SSR focuses on the governance, transparency and accountability of national-level security and justice institutions, but also on the impacts of the security sector on communities at the local level. The last 10 years of implementation have revealed that one of the core challenges of SSR implementation is the interplay between projects and policies conceived at the national and international level with ground-level local realities, including the influence of non-state security and justice actors, the concerns of remote or indigenous communities, and the priorities of local political actors and movements that operate outside of the country's mainstream political debate.[3] The result is often a reform process unduly focused on conditions in the capital and major urban areas, reflecting the values and preferences of the ruling elite. In spite of a growing awareness of the importance of incorporating local-level actors into peacebuilding and statebuilding processes, international actors have struggled to engage simultaneously both national-level actors and local communities.

Given this divide between actors, policies and processes at the local, national and international level, SSR's contribution to SDG 16 and targets[4] will depend on the ability of programs to bridge these gaps. SSR processes that fail to engage beyond the international-national level risk jeopardizing broader state-society relations, which are at the core of peace and development, particularly in the fragile and conflict-affected states receiving SSR support.[5] This brief argues that the success of SDG

16 will depend, in part, on the ability of SSR programs to operationalize the concept of legitimate and inclusive politics at all levels in light of the complex web of relationships between actors on the local, national and international stage. In this respect, the most relevant question for SSR practitioners is how to encourage national-local linkages while respecting the sovereignty of national-level actors.

This brief begins with a discussion of SSR's relatively poor record of implementation, arguing that conceptual ideals about local ownership and legitimate politics reflected in SDG 16 have proven difficult to translate into reality. The next section of the paper introduces the experience of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (IDPS), which provides a useful starting point on the challenge of incorporating the concepts of legitimate politics and political representation into donor frameworks while respecting sovereignty and the centrality of national governments to the reform process. The brief then suggests two related reform processes that will be needed in order to meet the targets of SDG 16. First, traditional, "top-down" SSR programming must capitalize on opportunities to strengthen its engagement with local-level actors, both through the SSR process itself and through the design of SSR programs. Second, promising avenues for "bottom-up" SSR must be encouraged and provided with the necessary resources to succeed.

## SSR, Local Ownership and Legitimate Politics

Despite a robust international consensus around the goals, models and frameworks of security sector assistance, the SSR model has not been effectively implemented in many challenging environments.[6] Analysts have documented a policy-practice and conceptual-contextual gap wherein the SSR model's holistic, governance-focused ideals fail to effectively translate into practice in various environments. SSR programming has instead suffered from "projectism,"[7] a narrow focus on particular security institutions (often, the police and armed forces) and a tendency to revert to earlier train-and-equip models when faced with short-term security crises. As many scholars have noted, states "rest on three central pillars of authority, capacity and legitimacy" (Sannerholm, Quinn and Rabus, 2016: 21). Most of all, SSR has struggled to improve the legitimacy of recipient states.  Moreover, SSR frequently has a decidedly externally driven character even as its track record has exposed the crucial role of local-level actors and processes in program success.[8]

The UN's approach to SSR recognizes security transformations as periods of political upheaval requiring careful consideration of both local and national political realities. The 2013 UN Secretary-General (2013) report *Securing states and societies: strengthening the United Nations comprehensive support to security sector reform,* notes that the goal of improving security at the local level "necessitates an inclusive dialogue and the participation of communities and civil society." The UN's (2012) *Security Sector Reform Integrated Technical Guidance Notes* emphasize that if donors are to effectively facilitate a nationally owned SSR process, relationship building must take place "with a broad constituency of actors at the local and national levels," meaning not only state actors but "civil society, the legislature, the media, and informal and traditional justice and security institutions." For various reasons, both moral and practical, local ownership is a central focus of UN SSR policy.

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Unfortunately, one of the lessons of SSR has been that conceptual ideals are often difficult to implement as policy. Supporting a locally owned, legitimate reform process that considers the preferences and priorities of a broad and representative group of local communities has proven to be an elusive goal.[9] The UN's approach understands legitimate political processes to be at the core of an accountable, transparent and rights-respecting security and justice sector. Although the importance of the local is highlighted in key SSR documents such as the *OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform*, security sector assistance remains a top-down exercise consisting mainly of national-level initiatives supported by international donors. These kinds of reforms often fail to make an impact at the local level — particularly in isolated or remote areas — where, in the absence of the formal security sector, security and justice services continue to be provided by a diverse set of actors including community elders, militias, self-defence groups, private security companies and even vigilante groups.[10] Security sector governance, likewise, operates at the local level according to a different set of actors, forums and processes, including community councils and tribal affiliations. However, locally based security and justice initiatives tend to have limited upward dynamism, limiting their ability to scale up successful programs or engage with policy making at the national level. Critics of liberal peacebuilding decry the lack of participation and representation of local communities, arguing that, in practice, "national ownership" mainly means consensus between political elites and international donors.[11]

## National Ownership and Legitimate Politics

The IDPS and the associated New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States stress the importance of "national ownership" and "legitimate politics" in peacebuilding and statebuilding processes, including SSR. However, exactly what is meant by the terms national ownership and legitimate politics remains an open question. One of the interesting dilemmas in instrumentalizing the concept of local or national ownership is whether to adopt a "minimalist" or "maximalist" definition.[12] In other words, is it adequate that national authorities who have been duly elected devise and lead the implementation of reforms, or is a broader and more inclusive consultative process needed to ensure genuine ownership? In principle, the SSR approach laid out in donor strategy documents adopts a maximalist definition, stressing the importance of dialogue and engagement at both the national and local levels.[13] From the perspective of the UN and international donors, engaging the local in security sector assistance and state-building and peacebuilding initiatives requires challenging internal reforms. Questions of sovereignty and the appropriateness of direct engagement with local actors remain critical unresolved considerations in donor policy guidelines.

In this sense, the IDPS offers a useful case study. The process led to friction between international actors "pushing for more inclusive and participatory understandings of 'legitimate politics'" and national-level actors who assert the primacy of national ownership over peacebuilding processes (Donais, 2015). As the dialogue has unfolded, national-level actors "have not always been comfortable with the participation of their own civil society groups – often seen more as threats than allies – in the Dialogue process" (ibid.). Mobekk (2010) notes that local ownership signifies not only a "local"/"external" but also an "insider"/"outsider" divide. Insiders within a society may resist a broader definition of ownership. This experience highlights that national authorities may be neither representative nor committed to broader engagement.[14]

Nevertheless, national authorities must be accorded the right to lead. In practice, they will always be at the forefront of the reform process. After all, as Nathan (2007: 14) notes, "SSR cannot be undertaken by the amorphous category of 'local actor' and it cannot be undertaken by civil society organisations, which can support and lobby for reforms but do not have the authority to implement them. SSR can only be carried out by an executive authority that controls or seeks to control the security services."

## SDG 16, Vertical Integration and SSR

SDG 16's focus on inclusive societies and participatory and representative decision making signals a commitment to better include local actors. However, the IDPS process underscores the challenges of engaging actors and processes at the local level while respecting the sovereignty of national-level political actors and institutions. If SSR is to achieve the goals envisioned by SDG 16, the local-national-international nexus must be further explored and incorporated into programming. SDG targets 16.6, to "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels," and 16.7, to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels," rely — at a fundamental level — on national authorities to engage local and community level actors.[15] In defining a broad vision for security sector transformation, one UN Secretary-General (2013) report noted that states should "apply a holistic, participatory and transparent approach to security sector reform, based on an inclusive dialogue process among and between authorities at various levels, from all branches of government and security sector institutions, national human rights institutions, civil society, especially women's groups and child protection advocates, and other non-State actors, while continuing to reflect and reinforce the host Government's primary role."

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In practice, it has proven difficult to encourage dialogue and engagement across the international-national-local spectrum. Although ownership is broadly defined, it tends to be minimally implemented. UN engagement focuses primarily on institution building, leading some to suggest that it broaden its scope to include grassroots-level actors.[16] It remains unclear whether or not productive direct international engagement with security and justice providers and governance institutions operating at the local level is possible. Indeed, the direct engagement of international actors at the local level raises political questions about the feasibility (and appropriateness) of "outsiders" facilitating improvements in state-society relations.

The most important consideration in engaging with local actors is to do no harm. SSR programs often face the temptation to bypass national authorities and cultivate relationships and partnerships with influential local-level actors, particularly in challenging reform contexts featuring ongoing conflict. This kind of engagement should be avoided, as it carries the significant risk of destabilizing the entire reform process and undermining national authority. Initiatives like the Afghan Local Police,

which launched with US support in 2010, were attempts to instrumentalize local actors to achieve short-term security goals.[17] Recent research on Afghanistan has found that direct international engagement with non-state security providers — intended to facilitate short-term stabilization — has resulted in the creation of enduring parallel structures of power that have undermined the Afghan state-building process (Derksen, 2016).

The lens of vertically integrated peacebuilding highlights the importance of the national as the locus of connection between inventive and context-specific local solutions and funding that often comes from national and international sources.[18] National-level involvement is also the key to sustainability; in bypassing national authorities to engage directly with local level actors, international donors often sabotage the sustainability of their programming, which either fails to make a lasting impact once project funds expire or is abandoned by national authorities that feel no ownership over the process.

## Practical Strategies for Local Engagement

The need to engage meaningfully with local stakeholders is reflected in the policies of the UN, OECD and major bilateral donors, which accept that without robust local ownership, few reform programs will be sustainable. This paper argues that effective SSR strategies for promoting vertical integration will fall into two broad categories. In order to encourage a more robust connection between what occurs at the international, national and local level, SSR actors will either need to make institutional reform receptive to local engagement or build national-local engagement from the bottom up.

### Make Institutional Reform Receptive to Local Engagement

International donors can facilitate national-level SSR programming that strengthens and reinforces national-local engagement, although the specific characteristics of reform programs will vary according to context. Institutional reform processes that are by nature top down can nonetheless foster linkages between the national and the local. As the national-level security institution most directly impacting local conditions, police-community platforms for engagement can be effective methods of building local ownership. In Haiti, for instance, community policing programs have been identified as a potentially productive way to bring a national-level reform program into productive dialogue with community violence reduction and peacebuilding programs operating at the local level (Donais and Burt, 2015). In Sierra Leone, Local Policing Partnership Boards are a

nationally and locally driven initiative credited with improving police-community relations (Albrecht, 2015).

Beyond community policing, other tools to strengthen national-local connections include human rights networks and consultative dialogues, which have been used effectively in various environments. A European Commission road map for SSR suggested that meeting community security needs would require "adopting a 'bottom-up' approach to security, complementary to a top-down institutional approach, starting from the identification of security needs as perceived and experienced by the population, discussed among local stakeholders and between communities and local and national authorities as well as security forces" (European Commission, 2015: 4). In practice, scholars have noted that civil society groups "tend to be engaged in a much more sporadic, less encompassing and less meaningful way, often constituting little more than initial consultation and infrequent dialogue" (Gordon, 2014: 8, referencing Caparini, 2010). On a related note, evaluation frameworks should incorporate the views of local actors: "For example, when dealing with a 'top down' approach, one might ask, how well does the security sector maintain the monopoly of force by overcoming non-state armed groups, and how efficient is the security sector? By contrast, with a 'bottom up' approach, one might ask, do civilians feel safe?" (Jayasundara-Smits and Schirch, 2016: 4).

### Build National-Local Engagement from the Bottom Up

In many cases, though, national-local engagement should go beyond local civil society actors articulating their priorities for reform or defining success and failure. As one report put it, "SSR is a top down idea that needs bottom up implementation" (Lorentzi, 2009: 6). Gordon (2014: 12) argues that in many contexts, a more bottom-up approach to SSR can accompany and complement the top-down nature of most reform programs. In particular, existing community safety structures (which are variously known as "district or provincial security committees, community safety councils, local security forums or citizen security councils") should be incorporated into SSR planning at the earliest stages. Gordon's paper cites a number of cases where these structures could be found in fragile and conflict-affected states, including in Haiti, Colombia, Guatemala, Nepal, South Sudan and Kenya (2014: 11). In Liberia, the SSR process has been criticized for being state-centric and overly focused on conditions in Monrovia to the detriment of more remote communities, but a process is now underway to set up local community security councils (Zanker, 2015). The UNDP's annual rule of law report for 2015 noted that because of

the implementation of these structures, "Liberians living in rural areas now experience much better access to the formal justice system (2016: 27). While none of the authors cited in this section advocated an uncritical adoption of local security structures, when empowered, community-level structures can facilitate national-local engagement.

These local initiatives must, however, be supported and connected to national-level policy development and program implementation. Community security programming funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Albania is a good example of SSR programming originating at the local level and demonstrating promise, but failing to connect with parallel developments at the national level. In 2003, the UNDP helped to establish Community Problem Solving Groups, which were to liaise with the police on safety and security issues. While the intention of the program was to increase local capacity to engage with the police, later evaluations criticized the effectiveness of these interventions at influencing police practice at the national level (Abazi et al., 2009). In Somalia, the UNDP has supported "bottom-up" initiatives to provide human rights training and sexual and gender-based violence training to traditional justice providers. At the same time, it has helped forge connections between formal and informal justice systems, including by assisting the Ministry of Justice to draft a Traditional Dispute Resolution Policy articulating a structure for engagement between the two systems (UNDP, 2016: 32).

For either strategy to be effective, donors must recognize that the process of SSR is as important as the outcome (Panarelli, 2010: 4).[19] The SSR process must involve widespread consultation and involvement from a variety of community-level actors. In many cases, it is the SSR process itself that creates space for engagement between national and local actors. As a case study on the Zimbabwe Peace and Security Programme put it: "Fostering reform also entails creating spaces for dialogue, exchange and negotiation about needs, priorities and strategies, with opportunities for top-down policies converging with bottom-up experiences and expectations" (International Security Sector Advisory Team, 2015). Ownership requires that local actors be engaged in the process throughout its lifecycle, from assessment to planning to evaluation. This means that the research, plans and policies that inform SSR practice must be done in a way that reflects the needs and priorities of as wide a constituency as possible. In other words, if the SSR process lacks active, inclusive engagement with local actors, the resulting SSR outcomes will likewise lack local ownership (Gordon, 2014: 10).

## Conclusion

This brief examined the ability of SSR programming to contribute to SDG 16, noting that progress depends largely on a more inclusive and productive engagement with local actors, processes and politics. SSR's mixed record of implementation has informed a critical discourse that emphasizes the importance of political acuity, inclusiveness and engagement beyond a narrow group of political elites. These principles inform the UN's approach to SSR and have been incorporated into SDG 16, which stresses inclusive and legitimate politics at all levels.

To achieve SDG 16, international donors will have to revisit the relationship between local, national and international, finding ways to engage productively with local actors, while ceding ultimate authority and responsibility to national-level actors. Moreover, national authorities must see SSR as an opportunity to improve or repair the state-society relationship by undertaking inclusive, consultative and representative reforms. The paper's final section includes concrete examples of SSR programming creating links between national and local actors, both by instituting more locally sensitive top-down SSR programming and by building on the legitimacy and representativeness of grassroots actors, processes and institutions as part of a more bottom-up approach to SSR. A vertically integrated approach envisions that internationally supported national-level SSR processes remain relevant and representative at the local level. At the same time, international actors can support the scaling up of promising local-level initiatives in order to facilitate their ability to make an impact on policies and processes at the national level. In both cases, national actors remain the lynchpin for successful coordination. While there may be opportunities to bypass national authorities, international actors should approach direct engagement with local actors cautiously and ensure that their association does no harm.

As the UN Secretary-General's report on SSR notes, the fact that the security of regimes depends in large part on the security of the individual, "poses an important challenge to the typical State-centric, post-conflict approach to security sector reform and calls for approaches that combine the central role of the State with its ultimate dependence on, and linkages to, the security and safety of individuals and communities" (2013: 5). SSR's contribution to the success of SDG 16 will depend on whether it is able to regain its original focus on representative politics, local ownership and human security.

## About the SSR 2.0 Briefs

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The Centre for Security Governance (CSG) is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank dedicated to the study of security and governance transitions in fragile, failed and conflict-affected states. Based in Canada, the CSG maintains a global, multi-disciplinary network of researchers, practitioners and academics engaged in the international peace and security field.

## Notes

1.  See the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (United Nations 2016).

2.  UNSC Resolution 2151 refers to effective, accountable and rights-respecting security sector institutions as the "cornerstone of peace and sustainable development".

3.  In the peacebuilding literature, this gap between elite negotiations and societal experiences has been described as "two separate peaces," a concept that applies equally to the gap between SSR policies and the experience of security and justice provision at the local level. See Lawrence (2014).

4.  Most significantly, SDG targets 16.6 "develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels"; and 16.7 "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels."

5.  See, for instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2011).

6.  See Sedra (2007 and 2013) for a discussion of these failings in Afghanistan and Iraq.

7.  This would also be described as pursuing SSR as a wide variety of separate, discrete tasks without consideration of the greater systemic picture.

8.  Nathan (2007), Chesterman (2007), Martin and Wilson (2008), and Schirch and Mancini-Griffoli (2015) offer useful perspectives on the importance of local ownership in SSR.

9.  Instead, SSR tends to be carried out in a "technical-administrative" apolitical manner (Jackson, 2011).

10. For instance, Baker (2007, 2010 and 2011) documents the extent to which non-state actors are frequently the ones actually providing security and justice services at the local level in Africa, rather than the formal security sector. Although there is an emerging literature on non-state security and justice providers and SSR, it remains to be seen what the operationalization of these concepts will look like for policy and practice.

11. On liberal peacebuilding, for instance, see Mac Ginty (2008) and Richmond and Mac Ginty (2015).

12. For a good discussion of the minimalist and maximalist conceptions of ownership, see Donais (2008).

13. While in theory these actors adopt a broad view of what constitutes local, in practice this is often interpreted more narrowly, and may be limited to consultations with military and political leadership (Gordon, 2014: 8).

14. As a recent OECD report noted, national authorities may have a different set of interests from both international development actors and the public; practitioners may have to determine which issues are likely to have support from all three groups (van Veen, 2016: 24).

15. McCandless (2013) has noted that UN peacebuilding discourse and practice "has increasingly called for national actors to be in the driver's seat."

16. These two models of engagement have been described as "linear" – the UN works with the national government, which in turn works with civil society, with the goal of strengthening state capacity, and "triangular" – the UN works with both state institutions and civil society simultaneously, in an attempt to improve state-society relations. See Lawrence (2014) for a discussion of these two models.

17. It should be noted that two scholars who are closely associated with the "local turn" in peace building have recently decried the "shallow instumentalization" of the concept of hybridity and hybrid political orders (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2016). Bagayako, Hutchful and Luckham (2016) provide a useful discussion on hybrid security governance in Africa.

18. This paper borrows conceptually from peacebuilding concepts such as "vertical integration," applying them to the SSR model. Vertical integration refers to the need for improved coherence and coordination up and down the chain of relationships that link international-level, state-level and local-level actors in peacebuilding contexts. For a further description of the concept, see Donais and Burt (2015).

19. Bendix and Stanley (2008: 101) also refer to the need to take the process of SSR as seriously as the results.

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