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Local Ownership of Security Sector Reform

Summary

- Security sector reform (SSR) is a highly complex and political process involving a range of international and local actors. There is a growing policy consensus that sustainability is a critical component of success for SSR programs, and that early local ownership is a critical component of sustainability.
- Practitioners face several obstacles to achieving local ownership, particularly in conflict affected countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. To overcome these obstacles and effectively promote local ownership, international actors must answer three important questions:
- First, what are we trying to achieve? Despite the apparent consensus on the importance of local ownership, the definition of local ownership is still debated.
- Second, which locals should take ownership of SSR? It is often difficult for international donors to select partners, since local actors often have competing visions and priorities.
- Finally, how do we measure success? In evaluating SSR programs, should international or local values and priorities be used to judge the success of SSR programs?

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Local Ownership is Abundant in Policy but Absent in Practice

Security sector reform (SSR) is the complex task of transforming the institutions and organizations that deal directly with security threats to the state and its citizens.¹ SSR can be a powerful tool for conflict prevention, but it is used most often in post-conflict environments. External actors assisting with post-conflict reconstruction establish programs to reform the military and police forces that protect citizens and the state. Eventually, the host nation takes on responsibility for these forces and reform programs. However, this transition from donor to local ownership often fails short of success. Reform programs may be inappropriate for local contexts, or are corrupted or terminated before their completion. In the worst cases, local security forces that are trained and equipped by international experts are politicized and used as tools for repression rather than the promotion of democracy. In order to avoid such unintended consequences, SSR programs must begin by incorporating local priorities and local ownership from the planning stage and insuring local participation in the implementation of programs throughout.

International donors have adopted guidelines that encourage local ownership of reform programs. The Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) guidelines on Security Sector Reform and Governance devote a chapter to encouraging donors to facilitate

national leadership of SSR programs. According to the OECD, “External actors need to orient their assistance to supporting local stakeholders as they move down a path of reform, rather than leading them down it.”² The United Nations has outlined 10 guiding principles for SSR, four of which relate to local ownership.³ The United States guidelines on SSR list “support host nation ownership” as the first of six guiding principles.⁴

Despite this consensus within the donor community, SSR programs are still most often driven in practice by donor priorities and timelines. In Afghanistan, the priority donors assign to counterinsurgency and counter narcotics operations trump those of the afghan population for personal safety and control of common crime. As a result, U.S police training programs stress military skills and counterinsurgency tactics, while other countries have programs that reflect various national priorities and levels of resources.⁵ This gap between doctrine and practice is exacerbated by difficulties with donor coordination complex operations and the challenges of working in an insecure environment. The gap also reveals tensions around goals and benchmarks for success.

What Are We Trying to Achieve? Local Buy-In Is Not Enough

The first question facing international actors is what exactly they are trying to achieve by promoting local ownership. The answer is seemingly simple: sustainability. When local actors are not involved in designing, implementing, and financing reform programs, the resulting programs are inappropriate for local contexts. They are often financially unrealistic without donor support and may be rejected by the local population. Appropriate local ownership of SSR programs often fails because donors neglect the development of national ministries that manage and support local security forces and concentrate only on training and equipping personnel.

There is a fundamental tension between supporting robust international SSR programs and supporting robust local ownership. There is a growing consensus among donors on the norms and values upon which the security sector should operate. This vision of a “reformed” security sector is citizen-oriented, accountable to the rule of law, and controlled by democratically elected governments. “Successful” SSR programs create institutions that are similar to those in Western countries regardless of whether they are completely appropriate in the local context. In many countries, collective governance and religion-based legal systems are the norm for large sections of society, particularly in rural areas. Such traditional systems may conflict with universal standards of human rights, particularly with regard to women and minorities. Promoting local ownership risks promoting norms that conflict with international standards.

Faced with tight deadlines and insecure environments, donors set priorities and move ahead with SSR programs. Viewing a robust approach to local ownership as idealistic, they try instead for the next best thing, which is “local buy in” for donor-driven programs. This limited objective is justified based on such practical considerations as urgency, local corruption, and a lack of local capacity to develop and implement programs. However, the failure to achieve genuine local ownership ultimately leads to the failure of the programs at great cost to donors, host nations, and the very priorities donors identified as justification for donor-driven programs.

Who Among Locals Should Own Security Sector Reform?

One obstacle to promoting local ownership of SSR programs is that local actors may have competing visions and priorities and inadequate resources for security sector reform. Local actors may simply lack the technical skills to play a leading role in designing SSR programs. Control of the armed forces is a highly political issue and local actors may not be able to reach consensus or may have alternative agendas. Corruption is often rampant and external actors must be cautious about

which local leaders they seek to empower. As a result, international donors often undertake the assessment, planning and design stages of reform programs unilaterally.

In fact, the process of developing a shared national vision among local actors for the security sector is a crucial first step toward ensuring that the reform processes is truly effective. While the technical knowledge of local actors may be limited, the discussion can be framed in terms of the fundamental questions that are accessible to all: How did we get here? What are the threats to our security? What institutions do we need to address these threats? How will these institutions relate to one another? How will these institutions be financed? This dialogue can result in a national security outline, which identifies priorities for donors to support. Participation in this national strategic planning exercise gives local actors a stake in the implementation of resulting programs.

External actors have important roles and responsibilities as facilitators of this dialogue. In particular, international facilitators must closely monitor which locals are driving the dialogue process. They can provide necessary funding, space and support to ensure that nonelite members of society are engaged. Involving civil society at an early stage practically informs the debate about realities on the ground, increases the likelihood that resulting programs will be locally appropriate and sustainable, and also encourages civil society to hold security forces and their leadership accountable. In some cases, the United Nations may be better placed to facilitate dialogue than bilateral actors with colonial or conflict-related relationships to the host country.

Facilitating SSR dialogue is a risky, complicated, highly political process. Participants may try to subvert or undermine the process or emphasize individual or group interests at the expense of the common good. Without this national conversation, however, subsequent programming will be unsustainable. The dialogue and the space for local actors to publicly voice opinions on policy and reach compromises is a fundamental first step in the reform process.

How Do We Measure Successful Local Ownership?

A final question with which SSR implementers must grapple is how to measure success. Local ownership is difficult to define, but it is even more difficult to measure. Metrics for SSR programs are generally limited to the number of individuals that are trained and equipped with little reference to whether these personnel can actually perform their functions and make an impact. Donor control of programs and resources mean project implementers are responsible to foreign governments or nongovernmental organizations rather than to the host nation officials and citizens. This distorted chain of accountability is exacerbated by the use of private security companies, which may subcontract functions to other firms and utilize personnel from numerous countries. Commercial firms may be more interested in generating profits for stockholders rather than in providing services further confusing the issue of accountability. In order to ensure effective government oversight, local actors should establish their own metrics for success. Local systems for monitoring and evaluation should be part of the national dialogue and resulting policy.

Questions of financing must also be part of the conversation between foreign donors and national governments from the start. In order to genuinely own SSR programs, host governments must invest their own resources. Including local financing helps size forces and institutions to what the host country will ultimately be able to sustain after donor support has been withdrawn. A shift towards host nations setting their own priorities and visions for their SSR programs inherently forces donors to relinquish control over programs, and increases the likelihood of the efficient transfer of programs to local control and maintenance over time.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report summarizes views expressed at a public meeting of USIP's Security Sector Reform Working Group on "Local Ownership of Security Sector Reform (SSR)" on December 15, 2009. Panelists included Timothy Donais, editor of "Local Ownership and Security Sector Reform," published by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, Adedeji Ebo, chief of the SSR Unit at the United Nations, Marc Cohen, co-author of "Protect and Serve or Train and Equip?," published by Oxfam America, and Aleisha Arnusch, lead SSR researcher at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Canada. Robert Perito, who directs USIP's Security Sector Governance Initiative, moderated the panel.

Recommendations

Neither foreign donors nor local actors alone have the combination of political will, financial resources, technical skills, local knowledge, and sustainable presence required to achieve success. Like all democratic processes, SSR is messy, multidirectional, unpredictable, and highly political. Donors must recognize that the consultative process and national dialogue are just as important as the outcome. This process, in which locals negotiate with donors and with each other, is difficult but absolutely critical.

External actors should focus on facilitating dialogue and supporting the development of a national security policy. This policy can provide a framework for future donor support and coordination under the priorities set by the national government.

Donors should ensure that civil society, minorities, women, rural populations, and representatives of non-state security systems are given voice in these discussions and have a stake in the resulting policy and process.

The dialogue should include discussions of how success will be monitored and to whom reform practitioners will be held accountable. Host-nation financing must be a key element of this discussion and could provide a useful metric for local ownership.

Local and international actors should move beyond a "foreign" versus "local" ownership mindset and acknowledge that a hybrid approach is necessary. Realistic planning and implementation will be facilitated with the acknowledgment that the process is difficult, context-specific and requires genuine cooperation between local and external actors.

Donors must shift their funding outlook to a longer-term view of supporting SSR programs in other countries. Donor priorities must go beyond immediate stabilization to looking at the sustainability of programs and preventing a relapse into violence.

Endnotes

1. Sean McFate. "Securing the Future: A Primer on Security Sector Reform in Conflict Countries" U.S. Institute of Peace, September 2008, page 2.
2. Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation. "Security Sector Reform and Governance" 2005, page 33.
3. United Nations General Assembly and United Nations Security Council. "Securing peace and development: the role of the United Nations in supporting security sector reform" Report of the Secretary-General, A/62/659-S/2008/39, January 23, 2008.
4. U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense. "Security Sector Reform," February 2009, page 4.
5. Robert Perito. "Afghanistan's Police: The Weak Link in Security Sector Reform," U.S. Institute of Peace, August 2009.
6. Robert Perito. "The Interior Ministry's Role in Security Sector Reform," U.S. Institute of Peace, May 2009.



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