

The Security that People Get Is Often Not What They Want

By Erwin van Veen

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The recent incidents in Ferguson, US, have highlighted two similarities in the provision of security across the world. First, people often don't get the security they want. Although the facts have not yet been fully established, the perception out in Ferguson is of a heavy-handed, brutal police response to a minor offence – possibly with racial bias. Second, external actors, in this case the US ministries of defense and justice that provide American police with heavy weaponry at attractive prices, often influence the type of security people get without having sufficiently thought through the consequences of their actions.

If the provision of security faces such issues in the US, it is safe to multiply them manifold in fragile environments, which are typically characterized by an ever-present threat of violence and poor levels of accountability and trust, as well as high levels of poverty. Here, the uniformed agents of the state are often a threat instead of a provider of security. Because insecurity hampers development and can create significant negative spill-over effects, richer states (such as the UK in Sierra Leone) and international organizations (such as the United Nations in Timor-Leste) have invested heavily in improving the provision of security in fragile environments. This has happened in large part on the basis of the notion of Security Sector Reform (SSR), which focuses on the joint and parallel improvement of both the effectiveness of security provision and the quality of its governance where its under-supply forms a barrier to broader development. Generally, such investments have generated poor results in that they have only marginally improved the security of those living under such conditions. In fact, three aspects of the policy and practice of SSR have often made external actors complicit in ensuring that people don't get the security they want.

First, despite professing the need to work context-specifically, external support has focused far too much on working with state security institutions. Apart from situations where these institutions were part of creating the very insecurity that SSR interventions seek to reduce (think of the Congolese army in the Kivus), they are more commonly simply not relevant to people. Afghans, Yemenis and Somalis do not turn to uniformed government representatives for their security. They turn to informal leaders, tribal elders, local militias and sometimes warlords (including for protection from the state). This is not to say that external actors should not work with state forces. Rather, it means that external actors should take more care to avoid reinforcing state capacities in ways that further entrench practices of marginalization and exclusion. It also means that informal security and justice providers should be given more attention. The oft-voiced perception that such actors are variable in quality and reliability and pose risks to human rights is a red herring – the same can normally be said of their state cousins. The more salient questions for supporting them are whether such support is replicable on different scales, what the longer-term consequences of creating a 'patchwork' of informal providers are, and how such engagement can be negotiated with the host government.

Second, external support has prioritized capacity over governance improvements to the benefit of elites and the detriment of citizens in fragile environments. Apart from it being just more difficult to work on governance than capacity, this has happened in part because of perverse bureaucratic incentives and in part out of self-interest. Perverse bureaucratic incentives take the form of short

timeframes, spending pressure and linear programming methods that together squeeze the meaning out of many SSR programs by forcing them to focus on what is achievable within the constraints of external actors rather than local constraints. The EU, with large amounts of money, insufficient field staff and rigid procedures, is at particular risk of such incentives. Moreover, external actors have often found it convenient to strike a deal with ruling elites in, for example, Pakistan or Yemen, in order to bolster the capacity of elite army or police units – overlooking their accountability – as long as they spent part of their time fighting the global war on terror. Governance needs to be put back into SSR. This requires putting a halt to distorting domestic power balances and focusing on empowering more voices to have a say on what security they want. This, in turn, requires more time and looser programming approaches.

Third, external actors have tended to insufficiently analyze the question of why security issues are resolved in the way they are in many of the places where they sponsor SSR, and who benefits from the governance arrangements already in place. By its very nature, security provision is never a blank slate. Where accountability and voice are low, it will often reflect and protect elite interests instead of those of citizens. However, elites are a broad category and only by understanding the diversity of their interests can SSR efforts be endowed with the right mix of confrontation and cooptation strategies that may improve security in the popular sense. Should this sound overly Machiavellian, rest assured that external actors generally have little influence on domestic security in another country in the first place. But that doesn't make it less important they know what they are doing.

A few actions can help improve SSR's track record as an intervention tool in environments with high levels of insecurity. To start with, those using it as a tool – whether USAID or a UN mission – should develop policy and programming strategies capable of interacting with domestic elite interests in different political settings in a way that opens up space for more transformative SSR, for example by enabling unusual voices to have their say or by also engaging customary actors. These strategies should be based as much as possible on existing evidence. Moreover, external actors should develop more fluid programming approaches that are problem- instead of capacity-focused to make sure that at the end of the day a tangible problem of ordinary people is addressed. Finally, nothing will happen without courageous innovation in real-life, building on initiatives such as Nigeria's DFID-sponsored Justice4All program, or Burundi's Dutch-sponsored Security Sector Development program. More such experiential programs are needed.

The temptation will be to use SSR as a 'solution' to current international concerns about transnational organized crime, violent extremism and porous borders. It certainly has a role to play. But if it is not to assist the next generation of strongmen, iron-fisted presidents and warlords it must focus on accountability instead of law enforcement, customary security instead of strengthening elite units, and regional security instead of hard border control.

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