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Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone 1997 - 2007

Working Paper Series

Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007

Issues and Themes of the Sierra Leone Security System Transformation Process, 1997-2007

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The working paper series on Sierra Leone is part of the research programme 'Security System Transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007'. These working papers present perspectives from both Sierra Leone and the United Kingdom regarding the implementation of activities broadly defined as security sector reform (SSR) in the period towards the end of and following the Sierra Leone war.

Following a core narrative constructed around four key events in the history of post-war Sierra Leone, starting in the mid-1990s and finishing with the successful General Elections of 2007, the work draws on a range of experiences from the process that may be used to inform future SSR policy and implementation. The final output of this research is a book documenting the security system transformation activities in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007.

This series is both an intermediate stage and an important output in itself. All papers were written by Sierra Leonean and British participants in security system transformation activities. The philosophy of the series is to edit as little as possible so that the views and opinions of the individuals are expressed, as much as possible, in their own words. As such, while the papers vary considerably in style and length, they provide a unique, collective insight into the Sierra Leone security system transformation process.

This paper outlines the key issues that arose from the research programme as a whole. It is a synthesis of much work carried out by people on the ground, particularly Sierra Leonean and UK members of a Working Group established during programme implementation. They include: Desmond Buck, Emmanuel Osho Coker, Kellie Conteh, Kadi Fakondo, Aldo Gaeta, Garth Glentworth, Barry Le Grys, Rosalind Hanson-Alp, Anthony Howlett-Bolton, Al-Hassan Kondeh, Christopher Rampe, James Vincent, Alfred Nelson-Williams and Mark White. In addition, while not formal members of the Working Group, Robert Ashington-Pickett, Keith Biddle and Adrian Horn provided crucial input and guidance.

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Introduction

In 2007 Sierra Leone conducted a general election without violence for the first time since the start of the conflict in the early 1990s. In the context of the horrendous levels of violence experienced by the people of Sierra Leone, this was a watershed event. Whilst poverty levels in the country today are still significant and the country's institutional reforms are still in the nascent stage, there can be no doubt that most Sierra Leoneans are far better off in 2008 than they were in the late 1990s. This sense that the country is more secure and thus more capable of conducting democratic processes such as a peaceful election is due in large part to the palpable sense of *personal* security that Sierra Leoneans feel today.

What happened in Sierra Leone from the late 1990s until 2007 can only be described as a transformation. In the late 1990s, it was a depleted, exhausted and ravaged country. By 2007, it was a country capable of presenting a democratic model to its citizens in the form of an election based on the simple standards of fairness, open debate and citizens exercising their right to vote.

This transformation would not have been possible without the intervention of the international community, particularly the United Nations (UN) and the United Kingdom (UK) and the leadership provided by a core of remarkable Sierra Leonean government officials. Both national and international leaders instituted, guided and managed system-wide reforms and tackled huge problems of reform over a long period of time and often in difficult circumstances.

Since the late 1990s, the experience of Sierra Leone has been synonymous with a set of policies known in the international community as 'security sector reform' (SSR). Indeed, Sierra Leone is frequently seen as *the* example of SSR. However, despite the widespread use of Sierra Leone as an example of effective SSR, to date there has been no comprehensive study of how the country's security system reform process was conducted between the late 1990s and the elections in 2007.

This working paper is part of a broader study, which includes a working paper series and a book entitled 'Security System Transformation, 1997-2007.' The title of the book has been chosen so as to highlight the breadth of institutions (hence the use of 'system' rather than 'sector') involved and the depth (hence the use of 'transformation' rather than 'reform') of the process in Sierra Leone. In this paper, the term SSR will be used to refer to international debates, whereas the term security system transformation will be used when discussing processes within Sierra Leone.

This paper provides a comprehensive narrative of what happened throughout this period and an analysis of the key issues that arose and/or are still present in the ongoing process of transforming Sierra Leone's security system. It is an overarching piece that draws on the other papers of the Working Paper Series, as well as additional research conducted in 2007-2008.

In spite of its reach, this paper, indeed the entire working paper series and book, discusses only a few of the salient conclusions and issues of the 1997-2007 Sierra Leone security system transformation process. We also outline briefly the history of how security system transformation developed in Sierra Leone and the context within which initial international intervention took place. Finally, we conclude by discussing the key issues and themes that have emerged from this period of Sierra Leone's history, many of which remain challenges today.

A brief history of security sector reform in Sierra Leone

The experience of security system transformation in Sierra Leone can be seen as a series of distinct phases, each with changing policies and context. Events in the first period between 1997 and 2002 were determined by the overriding context of open conflict. The general state of emergency surrounding Sierra Leone at the time left no space for sitting back and developing a strategy; the country was in urgent need of support.

Thus, programmes started in collaboration between the UK and the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) in the late 1990s were shaped as responses to consecutive crises prior to 2002, when the war, and the accompanying disarmament and demobilisation, was declared over. The lack of capacity to oversee the armed forces, properly coordinate responses to security threats or collect coherent intelligence became the focus of the intervention and work within the GoSL through a programme known as the Sierra Leone Security Sector Reform Programme. (SILSEP). The GoSL itself had been subject to two coups since 1992; it was incapable of gathering meaningful intelligence on the threats facing it, let alone countering threats when they were identified.

The basic approach of these early interventions reflected the basic needs of the security services, but also the political needs of the GoSL at that time. Police primacy, for example, had been a key priority of President Kabbah from early on, at least from 1996; the process of establishing a police force had thus been given priority. The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) was given a new ethos, Local Needs Policing, which encompassed approaches to gender-based violence through the creation of the so-called Family Support Units. It also included the purchase of vehicles, communication equipment and uniforms and, finally, support to the judiciary through the Law Development Programme.

At the time, predominantly as a result of the context in which operations began, but also partly because of the personalities involved, integration of these various security-related programmes did not take place. In addition, there was no coherent concept of the security system and thus, no sense of which institutions to transform. This knowledge was emerging, however, particularly during the period from 2002 until 2005. Thus, in many ways, international debates on SSR came to shape Sierra Leone just as Sierra Leone came to shape SSR – as a concept, as a set of policies and as an integrated set of programmatic approaches.

The year 2002 was pivotal for Sierra Leone. The conflict ended officially in January, although there were significant areas of the countryside where conflict was ongoing and certainly areas that were not under the direct control of the government. The first post-war presidential and parliamentary elections were held and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) won by a significant margin (70.03%). This was very much President Kabbah's triumph: he was seen as the man who brought peace to Sierra Leone after a decade of war. The elections were made possible with the deployment of what was the biggest UN peacekeeping mission at the time (17,000 foreign troops). However, while the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) provided transport and other logistic support, the actual policing of the election process, in the main peaceful, was undertaken exclusively by the SLP.

Immediately after the election, the agencies and programmes that had helped win the war were faced with a set of challenges very different from the emergency planning they had been conducting. These included considerable inter-ministerial and agency rivalry, the balance of the UK military between operational command and advisory roles and continued political instability. Above all, the GoSL and its foreign advisors had to contend with a very fragile peace exacerbated by the large number of armed former combatants, a non-functioning military and a partly-developed police force.

Post-2002, one of the key drivers of the security system transformation process centred on producing a security strategy that incorporated development objectives for Sierra Leone. In practical terms, this was reflected in the partly-interrelated Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and security sector review processes, where the latter was reflected in the former's Pillar One promoting good governance, peace and security.

The importance of the security sector review cannot be underestimated. First, it gave much needed conceptual clarity on security sector institutions and defined the significance of security for the future social and economic development of the country. Secondly, the review clarified the function of the Office of National Security (ONS) as an agency positioned to incorporate security and development objectives into an overall strategy. Thirdly, the fact that the review was integrated into the PRSP aligned

security and development to a degree that they had not been before.

The recent history of collaboration between international assistance agencies and the GoSL can be divided into three distinct periods. The initial period, from 1997 to 2002, was characterised by the challenge of beginning a reform process in a conflict environment, which subsided into a ceasefire situation and then shortly afterwards, reverted back to conflict. The second period, from 2002 to 2005, was largely concerned with developing the gains made through the security system transformation process to date and spreading some of those gains beyond Freetown. The final period, from 2005 to 2007, was a period of consolidation and development that culminated in the general elections of 2007 and encompassed a spreading of SSR activity beyond the fundamental reconstruction of security services and in to a wider approach to justice and security sector governance.

In terms of UK assistance, 2005 was an important year for the UK Department for International Development (DfID), as it devolved its assistance operations from its headquarters in London to Sierra Leone. In programmatic terms, it broadened its support to the justice sector as a whole, rather than just to the police, by creating the Justice Sector Development Programme. (Prior to this, little UK assistance had been given to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and prison services, in particular.)

During this period, international advisors and the GoSL also grappled with questions regarding the future direction of security system transformation in Sierra Leone. Sustainability of some of the measures deemed necessary during the war was questioned more strongly, including the core issue of affordability and future size of the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF). The issue of force levels and capability was particularly germane, since the security sector review had identified the country's critical security threats as internally-generated.

What does the experience of transforming the security system in Sierra Leone tell us about SSR in general and also about what worked and what did not work? First, all evidence points to the fact that there has been a

significant increase in positive public perceptions about their personal security. In short, the people of Sierra Leone *feel* safer. A survey was conducted in 2007-8 as part of the research contributing to this book[1]. The research was conducted among the general population in a number of districts, including Bombali, Kambia, Kenema, Kono, Bo and the Western Area (Freetown). In short, perceptions of security expressed by survey respondents indicated unequivocal improvement of security on the ground in Sierra Leone. From the research project as a whole, the following general points can be made about Sierra Leone's security system transformation process:

■ Getting the right people on the ground and taking action is more valuable than detailed, extensive and time-consuming planning. The experience of Sierra Leone shows that when capable people are empowered to make decisions, they devise ways to work together and get things done. The consequence of empowerment, capability and collaboration is more effective reforms.

■ National ownership is critical, even when there is a relatively weak government at the start of a process. One of the most positive elements of the UK intervention was the role taken by UK staff as *advisers,* not as implementers performing specific functions. The UK advisor approach proved to be immensely successful; Sierra Leonean staff were given the necessary space to transform and at times build up their institutions in a politically tense environment. They took responsibility for programme implementation, which increased their confidence and capacity.

■ Since turnover of international advisors is chronically high, development and maintenance of a good, *national* team is critical to successful, longer-term programme management.

■ At the beginning of the process, Sierra Leone lacked a strategy for transforming the security system; at the time of this writing, there are ongoing efforts to develop an exit strategy for the international community. While in the beginning there was a good reason for the absence of a strategy, as the Government of Sierra Leone was

effectively at war, the continued lack of strategy created a space for individuals to take decisions rapidly and as needed. The need for a strategy later in the security system transformation process became more evident, in order to ensure a sustainable future for the security system in Sierra Leone. This, however, is not the same as planning an exit strategy for the UK government.

- Reliance on a small pool of nationals is a positive in terms of leadership, but a negative in terms of sustainability or potential risk. The risk of a reform process led by a small group is that a professional security system emerges that can then be misused if the country becomes unstable.

One of the core questions for security system transformation – or SSR – in the light of Sierra Leone is whether or not it can be referred to as a coherent set of activities. There is clearly an element of SSR as a post-hoc rationalisation of events happening on the ground. At the same time, the case of Sierra Leone shows that transforming the security system is a political project for national and international politicians, policy-makers and practitioners, involving long-term commitment of all actors and stakeholders.

The context of intervention

Since independence from Britain in 1961, the main feature of Sierra Leone's political system has been increasing centralisation of power and resources in Freetown coupled with a deep dualism between Freetown and the rest of the country. After the rule of the Margais ended in elections in 1967, the then mayor of Freetown, Siaka Stevens, became Prime Minister. Following a series of military interventions, Stevens assumed full presidential powers in 1968 and effectively held sway until his appointed successor, Major General Joseph Momoh, took over following a one-party referendum in 1985. The key feature of this period was a gradual drift towards a one-party state, increased centralisation of resources and power in Freetown and a growing alienation in the countryside and amongst youth in particular.

In the face of increasing political pressure, Momoh eventually established a constitutional review commission, which recommended the re-establishment of a multi-party democracy. This was approved by Parliament in July 1991. However, 1991 also saw the formation of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) by Foday Sankoh and increased violence along the Liberian border. The stated aim of the RUF was an end to the corrupt government of Momoh, but in reality this was quickly overtaken by a logic encompassing control of natural resources.

In Freetown, meanwhile, in 1992, another military coup brought a group of young officers headed by Valentine Strasser to power. As the leader of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), Strasser and then his successors were largely ineffective, leading to an increase in power of the RUF until the involvement of the South African mercenary firm Executive Outcomes in 1995. Eventually, an increasing demand in Freetown for an election, coupled with international pressure, persuaded the NPRC to hand over power to a civilian government. Following two conferences in the Bintumani Hotel in Freetown, with heavy participation from civil society, elections were held in 1996; Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of the Sierra Leonean People's Party (SLPP) was elected President.

Two months later, discussions between the SLPP and RUF eventually led to the Abijan Peace Accords of November 1996. The unwillingness of either party to agree to disarmament or to international monitoring arrangements led to a breakdown of peace by early 1997. In addition, in Freetown, another military coup was staged by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) and the subsequent exile of the democratically-elected SLPP Government to Conakry, Guinea. This, in turn, led to the next cycle of violence that culminated in the return of the SLPP Government to Freetown, support from UN peacekeepers as well as UK Special Forces and official peace in 2002.

The importance of context and this research

The history of the spiralling decline of the security situation in Sierra Leone is critical to the overarching context of what has been achieved through transformation of the country's security system. A spiral that started in the 1960s and reached its nadir in 1997 cannot be reversed by a three- or five-year development programme. This is at the heart of the reforms that eventually produced security system transformation in Sierra Leone; the pattern of international assistance that developed was one of fire-fighting at first, moving to increasingly medium-term programmes within an overall framework of long-term commitment to Sierra Leone.

The core aim of this research was to construct a narrative of the collaboration that took place between the UK and Sierra Leone between 1997 and 2007. At the same time, it also set out to be a documentation of the development of security system transformation – or security sector reform – as a policy, or set of policies aimed at re-establishing a secure environment and law and order in post-war Sierra Leone which could potentially be applied elsewhere.

It is important to point out that the research within this programme is heavily contextualised. It deals with the specific set of circumstances in Sierra Leone and conflicts that existed at that time. As such, any policy recommendations taken out of this experience need to be viewed with caution. In the case of Sierra Leone, for example, virtually all the infrastructure, including buildings and records, had been either destroyed or overrun by the RUF. UNAMSIL and the UK were in a position to support the GoSL in establishing basic security across the country. However, those charged with rebuilding the country were faced with a situation where basic security institutions had effectively ceased to function. In the area of intelligence, for example, international and Sierra Leonean officials literally sat around a meeting table and designed an entire intelligence system from scratch. This type of very basic reconstruction of institutions was not limited to intelligence; it was repeated across several other security institutions, including the Ministry of Defence (MoD). This level of

starting with a blank sheet of paper is very rare in post-conflict or development environments and may explain why, in the particular case of Sierra Leone's security system, non-state actors such as paramount chiefs were only involved to a limited degree, e.g. in the Provincial and District Security Committees (PROSECs and DISECs) and the Local Partnership Policing Boards (LPPBs).

Specifically, although the creation of any governance system is ultimately political, the fact that several of the Government's administrative functions had ceased to exist or had been severely weakened meant that there was relatively less friction and resistance within the civil service than there could have been. Resistance occurred, of course, but it was relatively minor, because there were so few civil servants left. This is not meant to belittle the reconstruction efforts, but it does mean that the Sierra Leone experience may be very different from similar programmes in other countries and that careful attention should be paid to policy transfer carried out in widely different contexts.

Whilst the immediate security threat of the RUF had largely dissipated by 2000, the country was faced with a number of additional security issues. These included unstable borders and neighbours, the lack of a security infrastructure and discredited security institutions. In addition, the war had produced a rapidly urbanised population with no immediate prospects for improved economic status, a population that was about to be increased markedly by large numbers of ex-combatants who had been involved in extreme violence during Sierra Leone's conflict.

Fortunately, at the Government level there was a very powerful consensus for reform and reconstruction that incorporated political figures, senior operational leaders and the external community. The commitment of a core team of Sierra Leonean leaders, at political and senior civil service levels, was absolutely critical in driving the reform process and exercising national ownership. Indeed, while international advisers, programme managers and officers came in for short periods of time, it was the Sierra Leoneans themselves who effected positive change.

The role of the external community in Sierra Leone is noteworthy in that the UK provided clear leadership. As the dominant donor agency by a considerable margin, the UK exhibited a remarkable lack of many external harmonisation issues that have occurred in other post-conflict contexts. This leadership provided by the UK, backed up by military involvement, proved critical in establishing credibility not only with the Sierra Leonean population and Government, but also with the international community.

Key issues and themes emerging from Sierra Leone

There are, of course, several issues that arise within interventions that take place over long periods of time. In terms of Sierra Leone, there are a number of core themes that recur over time and have importance for both the development of Sierra Leone itself, but also for the development of SSR more generally. This list does not claim to be exhaustive, but represents some of the conclusions drawn from the research undertaken for the project on security system transformation in Sierra Leone, 1997-2007.

The importance of national ownership and engagement

One of the core lessons from Sierra Leone has been that national ownership can become critical from a series of viewpoints, but that this issue may not be straightforward.

First, it is impossible to overestimate the importance of finding capable people at both national and the international levels. National ownership requires some confidence on the part of external actors, but also a degree of control on behalf of national owners. In Sierra Leone, there has been a core group of individuals who have exercised collective ownership of the transformation process, even when they have had internal disagreements. Most importantly, on both international and national sides, there has been a critical mass of good people who have managed to keep the process going under extremely trying circumstances.

At the political level, there has been powerful and consistent buy-in to the overarching principle of security system transformation by the President and senior civil servants. This leadership has been important not only in terms of its ability to accept occasional intervention by its international partners, but also in terms of developing a professional environment and garnering public support for the security system. Critically, there has also been a pool of operations personnel at senior ranks of the army, intelligence and police, who have managed the process very effectively (including interface with external advisers) throughout the whole time period covered by this project, 1997-2007.

Secondly, the overall direction of the process has been driven by consistency within the core group of Sierra Leonean actors. Whereas international staff changed frequently (International Military Assistance Training Team/IMATT commanders in particular), many of key Sierra Leonean staff engaged in the process remained remarkably consistent. While the role of international advisers cannot be underestimated, it is incorrect to simply conclude that the security system transformation process was 'externally driven.' It is Sierra Leoneans, not external actors, who have invested almost a decade – or longer – in the process of transforming the security system and with it, the country as a whole. This continuity over a significant period of time has meant that a number of the key drivers of the process remained in place and provided both policy and operational consistency.

Sierra Leonean continuity and oversight

This continuity of Sierra Leonean staff, holders of valuable institutional memory, has also enabled the GoSL to manage external donor relationships coherently and increased trust between UK and Sierra Leonean actors. This smooth working UK-Sierra Leone relationship was also aided by the UK's consistent support and the absence of other significant donors.

Of course, there is a danger in this particular approach, in that a small group of powerful individuals can have the political and financial clout to see their decisions implemented, while hijacking the process and preventing other input. This is a particular concern in a young democracy with few consolidated checks and balances. While this is a point well taken, our rejoinder to it relative to Sierra Leone is 'what other choice is/was there?'

The development of civil society as an effective oversight mechanism in Sierra Leone has been driven in part by some of the institutions encompassed by the security system. In particular, the ONS and SLP have been instrumental in engaging civil society through institutions like the PROSECs, DISECs and LPPBs, but the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) have also sought to engage citizens by improving public perceptions of the army. The results from the survey produced in support of this project indicate clearly that these efforts have had a positive impact. Generally speaking, Sierra Leoneans no longer feel threatened by the army or the SLP, whereas before the onset of the transformation process, indeed, before the conflict, they certainly did. This change in popular perception, while not conclusive, indicates that the engagement with civil society has had at least some success. It is worth pointing out here, however, that only in 2006 was a structured attempt made to engage civil society as part of the programming in support of the country's security system transformation process. Civil society's security system oversight role is still in the nascent stage.

By far the least developed element of oversight within the system is at the political, including parliamentary, level. Due to issues with and between Ministries and Ministers and the lack of functioning parliamentary structures, one of the key oversight mechanisms within the Government is the ONS. The question remains, however: who monitors the ONS? In the longer term, the issue of ONS oversight may become politically risky; without proper parliamentary oversight and UK support, the security system may be hindered from developing into a truly democratically-led set of institutions.

UK coordination

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the individual international adviser who makes virtually all initial moves in co-ordinating external support with the host government.

Of course, the impact of one personality on any process is driven in part by the importance of individuals *per se*. However, in the Sierra Leonean security transformation context, it has also been a function of the lack of a coherent UK Government strategy, which drove a series of disagreements on the ground among the MoD, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and DfID officials. This was not helped by the lack of a DfID Country Office in Sierra Leone until 2005. Thus DfID decision-making power reflected a wider set of coordination difficulties at the UK Government level. These difficulties still exist today, despite the development of joint pooling mechanisms between departments, including the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP). Given these challenges, in some ways the level of coherence reached within Sierra Leone is surprisingly good, due, in large part, due to the crucial role played by individuals.

However, since Sierra Leone lacked virtually all of the basic tools and infrastructure necessary to govern and speed was of the essence, it was particularly important to get *something* up and functioning rather than leave a power vacuum. DfID found itself with no time to conduct formal planning procedures that would have held intervention up for a significant time.

In the event, DfID fell back on its professional experience in dealing with these types of situations and placed experienced staff from within and outside DfID in the field to assess and act on needs. These were not people who were necessarily well-versed in formal project management; they were opperations professionals experienced in running projects on the ground rather than experts in developing logical frameworks. This was a critical skill set in a situation where there was no way that the UK Government could have access to all of the relevant information fast enough. Thus, security-related programming in Sierra Leone became a response to immediate needs.

Britannia waives the rules

Another significant aspect of UK collaboration with the Government of Sierra Leone was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2002, a long-term agreement between the two countries scheduled to last until 2012. Because UK engagement was primarily the result of a coalition of high-level British politicians who were committed to a country they felt could not be allowed to fall further into chaos, there was strong pressure on UK Ministries to work together on Sierra Leone. When one takes into consideration the general difficulties of cross-department collaboration, this unusual level of UK coordination of efforts is an achievement in and of itself.

By extension, the experience of Sierra Leone influenced the creation of the conflict pool approach to managing aid funding, aimed at enforcing shared strategies across the FCO, MoD and DfID. However, there have been a number of internal issues regarding the management of these pools, not least of which has been the rapid and constant change of personnel involved with decision-making on funding priorities. This sometimes dizzying change of UK actors has led at times to a lack of long-term coherence. Because of changing UK priorities and staff inexperience regarding funding decisions, there have been times when the future of security-related programming in Sierra Leone has been in question.

Despite these difficulties, the early UK-Sierra Leone commitment to work together and the development of an overarching framework encompassed by the MoU was critical in establishing trust between the two parties. This was certainly the main driver in developing the increased confidence in the future of a GoSL backed by the UK and allowed UK expatriate staff to play a role as external catalysts in change and guarantors of trust in the government. In turn, the relationship of trust between the UK and Sierra Leone helped develop and nurture a credible group of Sierra Leonean staff as effective counterparts.

Sustainability

One of the issues in discussing sustainability in the context of Sierra Leone is what exactly we mean by the term. A purist definition of sustainability dictates that a government should be able to sustain its own security institutions without external interference. However, strict adherence to this definition would preclude *any* functioning security apparatus in Sub-Saharan Africa. The key word here is 'functioning', and it is on the relevant functions that are expected of Sierra Leone's security system that we need to concentrate.

Dysfunctional security institutions are prevalent in many parts of the world and are particularly prone to direct involvement in politics. In the long term, external military involvement in states where security institutions have ceased to function (except in a political sense) may be far more expensive and less 'sustainable' than providing steady long-term support and guidance to security institutions with the aim of preventing their becoming dysfunctional in the first place. Small amounts of investment over a longer period of time may produce a more functional and sustainable security system than no investment, steady decline and then the inevitable crisis followed by the inevitable intervention.

There are, of course, specific operational issues about the relative sizes of armies, police and intelligence systems that need to be addressed. In particular, the experience in Sierra Leone of linking the production of a security sector review where threats are identified to transforming the security system to counter these threats can be developed elsewhere. There are a few weaknesses in this approach, particularly the risk of ignoring external regional and international linkages. (For example, the RUF did not exist in Sierra Leone alone, but also in Guinea and Liberia.) Regional dimensions of the conflict and of any potential future conflict imply that a national security strategy should incorporate significant links with regional partners to prevent any future uprisings from falling between 'national cracks' relating to boundaries and jurisdictions.

The issue of sustainability also leads to a clash between external actors and national owners of the process. It is inevitable that there will be differences between perceptions of what is or is not sustainable in the long run, as well as what operational capability is required or feasible. Like much of SSR – and development activities more broadly – this is due in part to questions of political balance and pragmatism and, at some level, of balancing realistic strategic planning with plans that amount to wish lists. There may be hard decisions to be made about the form and function of defence and policing infrastructures, vehicles and equipment that will need strong leadership at the top. However, there must also be commitment from external donors to retrain and reconfigure security institutions that are fit for purpose, as opposed to mirrors of security systems in the donor country.

Where does Sierra Leone's security system transformation process leave SSR?

Whilst many activities are now implemented in the name of SSR, the concept remains rather weak, not only in Sierra Leone, but also within the UK Government. Given the length of time that the UK has been involved in security system transformation in Sierra Leone and how often this experience is used as an example of how to do SSR internationally, this is in itself a concern that needs to be addressed.

As we have seen, there were a number of different factors that led to development of the security system in Sierra Leone, not least the fact that at the beginning of UK involvement, there was no strategy or blueprint of what this process would entail. In effect, what SSR policy that exists within the UK Government is in many ways a post-hoc rationalisation of a diverse set of activities that clustered well within Sierra Leone. However, in order to back that conclusion up, we need to unravel this issue even further.

The specific experience of people on the ground who are able to react to situation and context is very different to having a coherent plan of SSR. Clearly SSR has taken place in Sierra Leone, but it has done so largely without a framework within which to act. The critical factors appear to have been the existence of a strong group of national owners who have remained relatively constant over time and the existence of a key group of external advisers who were able to work together to support the Sierra Leonean group. Even though the individuals themselves have not been constant, the constant presence of external groups who managed to work together (the UN, World Bank and DfID) and specific support mechanisms (IMATT in particular, as well as individuals supporting key security institutions like the ONS and CISU) have been critical in ensuring a constant upward curve of post-conflict reconstruction. In many ways, the experience of Sierra Leone shows how dedicated people can, over time, achieve an awful lot.

Current debates on SSR emphasize holistic and integrated approaches to the reform of institutions that deliver internal and external security. These debates consider the institutions of security, intelligence, governance and justice. At the same time, there are serious tensions concerning the further development of SSR when normal planning functions of government departments come in to play. The question that Sierra Leone asks today is how far can one actually plan a series of policies that are based in part on activities on the ground in response to immediate needs, activities that are, by definition, in a constant state of flux?

This question, in turn, raises a number of questions about SSR programming in general and how far SSR can indeed be programmed into the future. While there is a clear set of activities and principles within SSR, this does not amount to a plan per se. These principles and activities are more like a series of guidelines or a 'direction of travel'. Whilst this may be an important issue in itself, it does not lend itself to development planning in the sense of neat three-year project cycles. The experience of Sierra Leone, where transformation rather than reform was taking place, shows that SSR is governed by context and entry points and is, above all, an evolutionary process guided by individuals. This emphasises the importance of well-qualified and experienced individuals on the ground empowered to take decisions and to build relationships based on trust.

Conclusion: Was it all worth it?

Sierra Leone is still at the bottom of the league in terms of human development. However, it is clear that there have been significant gains in terms of basic living conditions of the majority of the population. In particular, the pattern of security threats faced by most people has changed markedly from an assumed threat from security forces themselves to more 'conventional' forms of threat, including domestic violence, street crime (frequently violent), smuggling (particularly of drugs), human trafficking and youth unemployment.

The survey conducted as part of this study covered just a small sample of districts across the country, but trends towards improved perception of security and security threats in all areas – urban and rural – are positive. These patterns in themselves, however, also have significant implications. The demand for particular types of security has changed; this needs to be reflected in security provision across the country, notably changing protection from extreme violence to a more recognisable set of concerns based around criminal activity.

Study results indicate that improved civil-military relations and professionalism of security actors produced by the transformation process are being maintained. Respondents expressed the feeling that civil-military dialogue had increased and that they feel less threatened today by security actors, such as soldiers and police. The concern about youth unemployment is reflected in a number of papers on post-war Sierra Leone that point to the potential threat of alienation of groups that identify themselves with those who originally took to the bush under the auspices of the RUF.

The threat of returning to some form of violent conflict remains, particularly in the countryside. In urban areas, public concern about street crime underscores the need to address the issue of youth unemployment. As in many countries, Sierra Leone is experiencing the issue of unemployed young men becoming the foot soldiers of criminal gangs and increasing the incidence of street crime.

The growth of criminal activity and persistence of unemployment and social exclusion also points to a continuing need for an effective SLP presence in the countryside. At the same time, the existence of these gangs engaged in the smuggling of drugs and people, for instance, means that the SLP and other security agencies need to continue to improve their own capabilities and to develop cross-border links. For example, a recent dramatic increase in drug activity in neighbouring Guinea indicates that SLP linkages with their cross-border counterparts should become a priority. All of these current security challenges point to the need to change and enhance the skill sets employed by security services to reflect the changes in the threats faced.

Given the weakness of Sierra Leone following the war, the development of gangs happened relatively rapidly and whilst security has improved, there is no way in which the total security system transformation process could be said to have been completed, even after ten years.

The importance of the justice sector emerged in most of the discussions we have had during our research. In particular, a number of security stakeholders expressed that woeful delays in processing and sentencing criminals by the justice system has a widespread negative impact on the morale of the SLP. Clearly, support for continued development of the SLP must be linked with simultaneous development of the criminal justice system, as is currently done through the Justice Sector Development Programme (JSDP).

At the same time, it is clear that for most people in Sierra Leone, justice is local; it involves a wide range of non-formal and semi-formal conflict resolution mechanisms, including village elders, religious figures and chiefs. However, reports from Kono, for example, suggest that some of these mechanisms result in controversial land allocations, an extremely sensitive issue that was one of the social causes of the war. One implication of the study's findings is that justice reforms should pay more attention to non-formal justice mechanisms, partly addressed through the ongoing JSDP, whilst at the same time encouraging an accessible SLP and magistrates system.

Overall, it is clear that public perceptions of security in Sierra Leone have markedly improved and that security system transformation has managed to markedly improve public knowledge of and confidence in the

security services. The fact that more than 40% of the survey's respondents understood the functions of local intelligence infrastructures is, in itself, a tremendous success. If the public continues to be informed about and involved with local security infrastructures, Sierra Leone has begun a civil-security sector relationship that could rival those in more developed countries.

Finally, public and stakeholder confidence in security and the success of the security system transformation process as a whole resulted in remarkably free and fair elections in 2007, which were conducted without significant violence or political involvement of security services. An incumbent government left office and a new government took over – peacefully and with pride.

Footnotes

[1] This research was carried out by Conciliation Resources and James Vincent. The research design was discussed by the research team and the working group guiding the authors.

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1 Jackson, P. and Albrecht, P. (2008) *Issues and Themes of the Sierra Leone Security System Transformation Process, 1997-2007.*

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