DCAF | Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance

Building Evidence on the Link between SSG/R and Development

Policy & Practice Dialogue Series: Introductory Session Report

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Introduction

The Policy and Practice Dialogue Series, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, addresses the persistent challenge of linking security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) to broader development goals. While the interconnection between security and development is widely acknowledged, a significant gap remains in concrete and up-to-date evidence to substantiate the role of SSG/R in fostering stability and development. As a result, development actors have hesitated to fully engage with SSG/R, affecting the effectiveness of international support and potentially undermining efforts to include SSG/R in future global development frameworks, such as the next iteration of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Through a series of online dialogues, this initiative seeks to bridge the evidence gap by convening researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to explore and enhance the evidence base, ultimately supporting more effective SSG/R programming.

The introductory session set the stage for the dialogue series by examining the current state of evidence and perspectives on the link between SSG/R and development. It provided an overview of the security-development nexus, featuring insights from experts in both SSR and development, who highlighted key challenges and opportunities in understanding this relationship. The aim was to establish a common understanding among participants, identify gaps in the current research, and outline topics for further exploration. Representatives of the following organizations attended the Dialogue: UNDPO's SSR Unit, World Bank, OECD, UNDP, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Expertise France, DCAF and independent experts.

Key Takeaways

Understanding SSG/R's Contribution to the Security-Development Nexus

Providing evidence of SSR's success in advancing the security-development nexus has become increasingly challenging: A key concern raised during the session was the weakening of evidence supporting this nexus, even in cases where countries have undergone successful SSR processes. This challenge is compounded by a lack of progress – or in some cases regression – on key data indicators under SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). Such trends make it more difficult to build a compelling case for SSR investments in peace and security programming, and to demonstrate their contribution more widely to development.

Insecurity inhibits development, but does security promote development?: The dialogue highlighted lessons from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), where countries beset by insecurity, were among the worst performers. Participants reiterated that any progress made in development, such as in health or education, can be undone by insecurity. In an extremely short period of time, armed conflict can destroy years or decades of efforts to build infrastructure, schools and hospitals. Thus, there is considerable evidence to prove how insecurity undermines development. However, the session also raised the critical question of whether the inverse holds true – does the provision of security contribute positively to development? The example of Liberia was shared, where despite relative progress on security sector reforms and increased security, the country remains among the lowest performers in human capital indicators. This challenges the notion that security gains alone are sufficient to drive development, and underscores the importance of complementary efforts, such as addressing inequality and social cohesion, to ensure that security gains translate into broader development outcomes.

Development impacts security, but how and to what extent?: The two-way relationship between security and development was acknowledged (i.e. "there can be no security without sustainable development, and there can be no sustainable development without security"). It was noted that security (or a lack thereof) does not only impact development, but that development (or a lack thereof) can also impact security. A case

study of research on Liberia and DRC illustrated how progress (both positive and negative) in development sectors, specifically economic livelihoods, education and health, impacted SSR programmes in both countries. Another example was presented from Liberia, where the lack of basic infrastructure, such as electricity and water, in regional security hubs led to challenges in providing effective security.

SSR's role in the security-development nexus needs to be better understood: As noted above, does SSR lead directly to development? Or does SSR lead directly to stability, which in turn drives development? This requires exploring both the direct and indirect pathways through which SSR impacts development outcomes. In particular, there is a need to understand whether its primary contribution lies in fostering stability that creates the conditions for broader development progress. Stabilization initiatives, such as smaller-scale efforts to rebuild communities after conflict, could be a potential area to explore the causal relationship between SSR and development. By analyzing how security improvements in these communities have led to enhanced development outcomes, new insights into the SSR-development nexus could be gained.

Interest and funding in SSR are declining, while global insecurity increases: Connected with the above point on the decline and lack of evidence, there has been a discernible trend among donor countries to move away from security and justice programming due to the aforementioned challenges in evidencing the impact of SSR and justice outcomes, possibly towards topics that are less complex, shorter-term, and easier to measure. This trend also comes as development assistance budgets more generally shrink. Unfortunately, this comes amid wider trends that global conflict, violence and instability are increasingly rapidly, meaning the need for SSR is even greater than ever.

Policy and Programming Entry Points

Utilizing existing frameworks to integrate SSR and development. While work still needs to be done to demonstrate evidence of the relationship between SSR and development, there are still significant commitments to the security-development nexus, and SSR's contribution to it. The United Nations, via the Sustainable Development Goals, Sustaining Peace Agenda, and the UN Secretary General, as well as the African Union, World Bank, OECD, among others, have all clearly articulated the security-development nexus, including SSR's contribution to it. Embedded within these commitments is a call to better align security and SSR with development initiatives.

Leveraging National Development Plans to integrate SSR and Development. There is a growing focus on SSR in national development plans. These could be further leveraged to make the case that SSG/R is not viewed in isolation but as an essential component of national stability, economic growth, and societal resilience in many countries. Moreover, it would be useful to explore whether the inclusion of SSR in NDPs can serve as an entry point for deepening in-country engagement on SSR through a broader development lens.

Resilient and good governed institutions as drivers of development: The importance of resilience was underscored, with resilient and well-governed security institutions recognized to play a significant role in fostering development by creating stable, predictable environments that enable economic, social, and political progress. Research has demonstrated how the presence of inclusive and resilient institutions is also a key approach to mitigate and prevent grievances and conflict, which are also directly related to stability and development. Building resilient institutions requires governance approaches which are at the heart of efforts to strengthen the good governance of the security sector.

Adopting a people-centered approach to SSR: The importance for SSR to adopt a more people-centered approach was underscored. This shifts the emphasis away from traditional state-centric approaches to security (e.g., training and equipping forces) to addressing localized security concerns, which can be as simple as installing street lights or as complex as addressing food insecurity. Centering the voices of the poor and marginalized communities was also highlighted as critical to ensuring SSR has a direct impact on their immediate security needs, and as a way to begin to resolve some of the shortcomings posed by state-

centric SSR, which did not always result in delivering security to people. By addressing the specific concerns of communities, a people-centered approach builds social cohesion and a sense of shared purpose, reducing tensions and contributing to more resilient societies. Moreover, by ensuring that marginalized groups have a voice in security matters, people-centered approaches address underlying social and economic inequalities.

Designing development-sensitive approaches to security: SSR and development practitioners have largely developed effective tools to take a security or conflict-sensitive approach to programming. However, there remains a gap in developing tools and mechanisms on how to take a developmentally-sensitive approach to security programming. How would one conduct a development analysis of SSR programmes? What difference could such an approach make?

Looking Ahead: Key Research and Policy Priorities

Building a stronger evidence base for SSR's impact on development outcomes. While there remains some evidence of the security-development nexus, and SSR's role in contributing to it, evidence still largely remains piecemeal, ad hoc and anecdotal. More evidence could be generated through case studies, statistical data, and anecdotal stories from regions where SSR has been implemented, such as in post-conflict situations. Additionally, greater consolidation between the peace, security, and development sectors is essential to build a stronger evidence base for SSR programming.

Understanding SSR's role in advancing health, education, and economic livelihoods: Development is a broad concept that encompasses various dimensions. To fully understand SSR's role in development, it is essential to explore how SSR contributes to these different dimensions. "Human Development" provides a relatively comprehensive definition of development, focusing on three key dimensions: health, education and economic livelihoods. Thus, as a first step in building evidence of SSR's impact on development, research could focus on these sub-components – examining how SSR influences improvements in health outcomes, educational access, and economic livelihoods. This focused approach could help clarify the direct and indirect contributions of SSR to broader development goals.

Exploring the relationship between defense expenditure and development outcomes. While there are concerns that defense spending may divert resources from essential development initiatives, it is important to analyze its multifaceted effects on economic and social stability. In some contexts, defense spending can play a role in driving economic growth—through job creation, technology transfer, and infrastructure development. However, further evidence is needed to fully understand these dynamics and mitigate potential negative outcomes, such as the risk of the military exerting undue influence over economic sectors. Public expenditure reviews of the security sector can provide valuable insights into how defense spending aligns with broader development objectives and help identify inefficiencies or areas of concern. These reviews can also serve as a tool for ensuring that defense spending remains transparent, accountable, and subject to appropriate oversight.

Developing a modern business case for SSR's integration into broader development agendas.
Developing a compelling business case for integrating SSR into broader development agendas is crucial in today's environment, where Development Assistance financing, particularly for the peace and justice sectors, is declining. Amid shifting donor priorities and increasing skepticism from countries undergoing SSR processes, there is a clear need for a renewed and persuasive narrative on SSR. Strengthening this narrative requires robust evidence of SSR's impact, along with a clear demonstration of how SSR can be tailored to address new challenges and evolving priorities. By exchanging experiences on how to do this and learning how SSR is framed in national development contexts, progress could be made in developing and selling a stronger business case for SSR.