Civil Society

Roles and responsibilities in good security sector governance

About this series

The SSR Backgrounders provide concise introductions to topics and concepts in good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR). The series summarizes current debates, explains key terms and exposes central tensions based on a broad range of international experiences. The SSR Backgrounders do not promote specific models, policies or proposals for good governance or reform but do provide further resources that will allow readers to extend their knowledge on each topic. The SSR Backgrounders are a resource for security governance and reform stakeholders seeking to understand and also to critically assess current approaches to good SSG and SSR.

About this SSR Backgrounder

Civil society engagement is part of a culture of participation that enhances the democratic nature of decision-making about security. The expertise and independent interests of civil society provide a counter-balance to government policy by providing policymakers with a wider range of perspectives, information and alternative ideas. However, civil society activism is not always democratic or representative of the population's needs or interests and does not automatically lead to effective oversight. This SSR Backgrounder explains how civil society can improve the accountability and effectiveness of the security sector.

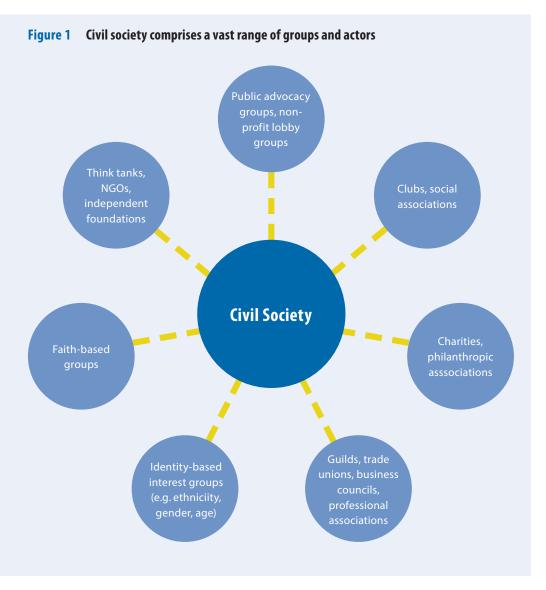### This SSR Backgrounder answers the following questions:

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What is civil society?

Civil society means all the different kinds of **groups that people form around a shared interest or vision of public interest:** for example, charities, philanthropic or advocacy associations, clubs, guilds, trade unions, professional organizations, business associations, community or residency groups, indigenous or ethnic interest groups, faith-based organizations, think tanks, NGOs and independent foundations (see figure 1).

There are three defining characteristics of civil society in a democracy:

1. **Civil society acts in the public interest:** Civil society voices opinions about issues of interest to society and public life. Civil society opinions about social interests, politics and policy are diverse and sometimes contradictory or conflicting, but all are committed to improving social outcomes. Unlike political parties, civil society does not aim to influence public interest by becoming part of government.

Figure 1   Civil society comprises a vast range of groups and actors

2. **Civil society is freely organized:** Civil society can be organized into formal groups recognized by law (such as associations, organizations, foundations, etc.) or civil society can be organized informally, based on looser social relationships between people (social clubs, popular campaigns, regular meetings, platforms, networks, etc.). Yet, no matter how civil society is organized, participation and membership of civil society groups or activities is always voluntary and independent of government control (though not always state support).

3. **Civil society has non-profit objectives:** Although civil society often requires financing for its activities, and groups often raise revenue for this purpose (including from governments), making a profit is never the reason for its existence. Civil society sometimes advocates on economic issues but is never engaged in for-profit business activities.

Another way to think of civil society is to think of what it is not. Civil society is all the types of social activity that are not part of state or government affairs, commercial or business activities, or the private lives of the general public (see figure 2).

Civil society groups form because of a shared problem or interest, which means they often understand very well the views of the population concerned. If civil society develops an agenda for change over a particular issue, it has to lobby, advocate and persuade the government, the business sector or the general public to make the changes it wants to see. Well-organized civil society can provide an effective channel for democratic representation with far-reaching effects on society, and on security.
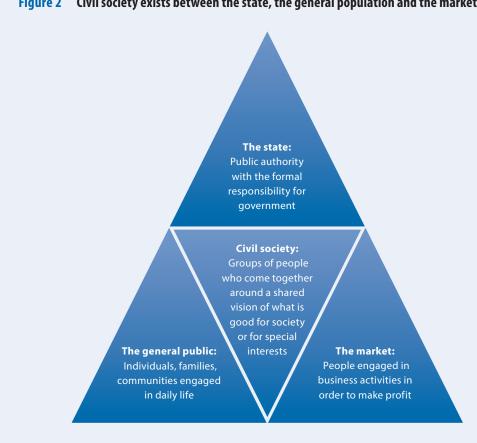
Figure 2 **Civil society exists between the state, the general population and the market**

The state: Public authority with the formal responsibility for government

Civil society: Groups of people who come together around a shared vision of what is good for society or for special interests

The general public: Individuals, families, communities engaged in daily life

The market: People engaged in business activities in order to make profit
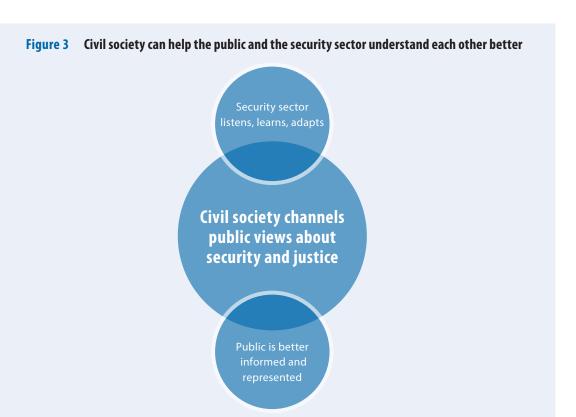
How can civil society improve SSG?

A civil society engaged with security issues is a valuable asset to democratic security governance because it creates a channel for communicating the diverse views of the population about the quality of security and ways to improve it.

SSG is enhanced when civil society voices public opinions about security and the security sector responds. This is because:

– **The security sector learns more about public views:** Because civil society mobilizes members of the public around issues that matter to them, civil society understands and can communicate to the security sector the real effects of state security provision, management and oversight. Listening carefully to civil society views, responding to the concerns raised and including civil society representatives in decision-making makes the security sector more responsive to a broader range of security concerns and public interests.

▶ **Media and civil society** Free and independent media are sometimes considered part of civil society because they share a similar role in promoting a vision of public interest and provide oversight of government, including the security sector. However, media can function on a for-profit basis or may be state sponsored and government controlled, and for this reason some people do not consider professional journalists and media outlets to be part of civil society.

For more on the role of the media in good SSG, please refer to the SSR Backgrounder on "The Media".

Figure 3   Civil society can help the public and the security sector understand each other better

Security sector listens, learns, adapts

Civil society channels public views about security and justice

Public is better informed and represented

– **The general public learns about the security sector, as well as current security problems and solutions:** Civil society provides citizens with detailed, targeted information about security and the way the security sector works. By informing its constituencies or the population at large about problems and solutions in security matters, civil society spurs public debate about SSG. When issues of concern are brought to public attention, this strengthens demand for greater public accountability and transparency in decision-making, use of resources and standards of service provision.

Several categories of civil society activities improve SSG:

Awareness-raising: Civil society seeks to generate mass public interest in a security issue by providing information about things people would care more about if they were aware of them. This is important because security problems sometimes stem from misunderstandings about the legal and legitimate roles and responsibilities of the security sector. Raising awareness about legal and democratic expectations, obligations and possible dilemmas improves public understanding about security and justice provision and can also generate demand for improvement. Public education, sensitization and information campaigns improve knowledge and can enhance the population's experience of security and the legitimacy of state security and justice provision. At the same time, helping those in the security sector better understand the concerns of men, women, boys and girls from different backgrounds helps the sector address the diverse needs of all groups in society.

Advocacy: Civil society can advocate for better security by presenting relevant decision-makers with solutions to specific security problems or the security concerns of a particular group. Advocacy on security issues can have a significant impact if it uses convincing arguments and demonstrates in-depth understanding of the political and operational environment. Advocacy may include networking, constituent action and public mobilization, agenda-setting and policy design, implementation and monitoring. Advocacy often means facilitating dialogue and ongoing engagement with members of parliament and government and security officials who are prepared to consider changes to security sector rules and practices. Advocacy may also involve targeted campaigns or the activation of regional and international organizations or networks to gain greater public support for a cause.

▶ **Good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR)** Good SSG describes how the principles of good governance apply to public security provision, management and oversight. The principles of good SSG are accountability, transparency, the rule of law, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency.

The **security sector** is not just security providers: it includes all the institutions and personnel responsible for security management and oversight at both national and local levels.

Establishing good SSG is the goal of security sector reform. SSR is the political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, the rule of law and respect for human rights. SSR may focus on only one part of public security provision or the way the entire system functions, as long as the goal is always to improve both effectiveness and accountability.

For more information on these core definitions, please refer to the SSR Backgrounders on "Security Sector Governance", "Security Sector Reform" and "The Security Sector".
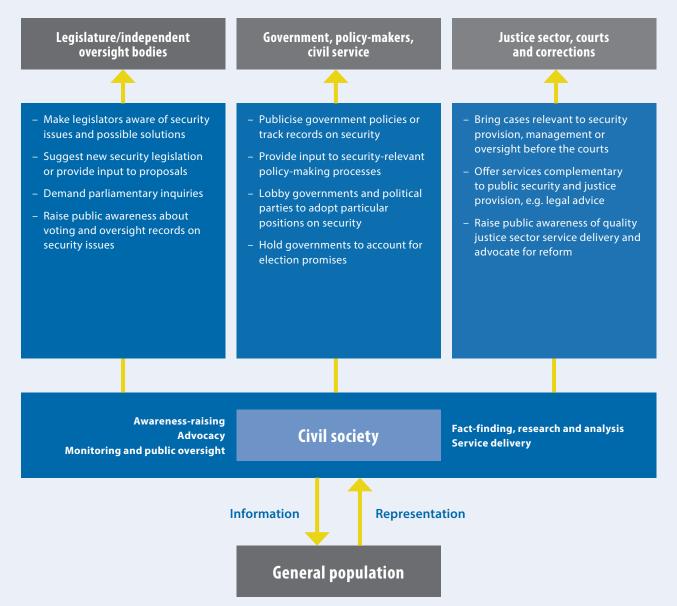
Figure 4 Civil society uses different strategies with different elements of government to improve SSG

Legislature/independent oversight bodies	Government, policy-makers, civil service	Justice sector, courts and corrections
– Make legislators aware of security issues and possible solutions – Suggest new security legislation or provide input to proposals – Demand parliamentary inquiries – Raise public awareness about voting and oversight records on security issues	– Publicise government policies or track records on security – Provide input to security-relevant policy-making processes – Lobby governments and political parties to adopt particular positions on security – Hold governments to account for election promises	– Bring cases relevant to security provision, management or oversight before the courts – Offer services complementary to public security and justice provision, e.g. legal advice – Raise public awareness of quality justice sector service delivery and advocate for reform

Awareness-raising
Advocacy
Monitoring and public oversight

Civil society

Fact-finding, research and analysis
Service delivery

Information   Representation

General population

Monitoring and public oversight: By systematically examining specific security issues or practices in a transparent and consistent way, civil society can monitor and oversee the performance of the security sector. Monitoring and oversight seek to document and analyse the impact of government action and suggest ways to improve it. It is sometimes called the "watch-dog" function because civil society oversight and monitoring can raise the alarm where there is potential abuse or wrong-doing. Civil society can check whether laws are respected, policies are adhered to or standards are maintained. Because civil society stands outside government systems of oversight, its independence adds credibility and legitimacy to the state security sector while creating barriers to misuse and abuse. Civil society monitoring of the security sector enhances SSG when it involves a visible and active effort to ensure the security sector respects the rule of law and human rights within frameworks for democratic governance.

Fact-finding, research and analysis: Civil society relies on accurate information and coherent analysis to support its engagement on security issues. Through sustained work on security and justice topics, civil society often develops specialist skills and knowledge that can inform policymaking, provide insight into community needs and interests, monitor the security sector more effectively and augment and complement government information and policymaking. A security sector that is open and receptive to civil society participation can benefit from the information, analysis and advice civil society offers. In this way, civil society can directly influence security management, oversight and provision and help inform the media and the broader public on issues of concern.

Service provision: Civil society sometimes provides services that augment and support state security and justice provision, for example, community cooperation in law enforcement though neighbourhood watches, patrols or community forums, or voluntary emergency response services, such as fire brigades, search and rescue assistance or lifeguarding. Sometimes, civil society works directly with security providers to offer assistance or services that complement state security and justice provision, for example, legal advice, victim support or medical and social services, among others. Civil society can also work with the security sector to provide training on specialist topics, for example, training for security providers or officials on identity or community issues, or community training on aspects of security or justice.

How can working with civil society help state security and justice institutions?

Civil society can enhance many aspects of security oversight, management and provision. **Civil society participation in SSG is based on the idea that governments should be accountable and responsive to the people they govern.** Working closely with civil society means that:

– **Security and justice providers can become more professional and effective:** Effective public oversight requires civil society to become familiar with all aspects of security sector performance and its insight can help find new and better ways of delivering security;

– **Security and justice providers gain legitimacy and credibility through public dialogue:** Civil society engagement can create ongoing dialogue between the public and the security sector, which helps build trust and understanding;

– **Security and justice providers can better prevent conflict and violence:** Civil society can help identify the grievances and vulnerabilities that may cause violence and support state actors to develop better long-term approaches to prevention and reduction.

When does civil society make insecurity worse?

Civil society is not always democratic or representative of the population's needs or interests, and its inclusion will not automatically lead to effective oversight of the security sector. Civil society is as diverse as the people that comprise it; this means that there is a great variety of views about what is in the public interest and people may advocate views that others find offensive or unacceptable.

Different and conflicting views are part of democracy; however, civil society activism can contribute to insecurity when it seeks to limit basic freedoms and human rights, advocates for undemocratic values or incites conflict and violence.

Civil society can also contribute to insecurity through unintended consequences. This may be the case when civil society actors:

– Set incentives for local talent to leave public sector roles and join international civil society for more favourable working conditions;

– Prevent governments from finding their own solutions by replacing rather than strengthening government functions;

– Fragment services and constrain cooperation between different actors;

– Fragment the population by promoting exclusive membership that entrenches exclusionary divisions within society;

– Promote unsustainable and/or self-serving projects;

– Carry out activities without accountability to anyone.

Public oversight of security can sometimes clash with the state's need for secrecy in the interest of national security. International law recognizes the right of states to restrict certain fundamental rights for legitimate reasons of national security or public order. Clear schedules for the classification of information can balance freedom of information with the need for confidentiality.

What challenges does civil society face?
Freedom of association and freedom of speech allow civil society to communicate ideas to the public and to mobilize political support. These freedoms are recognized in the major international human rights treaties and in the constitutions of most countries – civil society activism helps protect them from erosion. Where the government uses the security sector to restrict these and other civil and political rights, civil society might be the only actor able to voice popular opposition to such policy.

Some challenges constrain the ability of civil society to engage with the public on security issues or to provide effective oversight:

– **The tradition of secrecy** surrounding the security sector makes attempts to regulate or inform the public about its policies and activities difficult;

– **Prioritization of national security concerns** over civil liberties and human rights means that there is less scope for demanding accountability from the security sector;

– **Civil society may lack institutional capacity** – such as expertise in security matters, key information or sufficient confidence – making it difficult to engage with the security sector on an equal footing;

– **Lack of transparency and limited freedom of information laws** prevent civil society from gaining the information it needs to advocate effectively on security issues;

– **Lack of legitimacy and independence** among civil society if their activities are either funded or co-opted by elements of the security sector;

– **Insufficient support for transparency and democratic accountability** of the security sector, in favour of technical assistance that focuses on the effectiveness and efficiency issues without regard for democratic oversight;

– **Failure within civil society to cooperate or collectively advocate** on issues related to security sector oversight. Civil society can be dominated by powerful groups, which can lead to marginalization of other views or organizations;

– **Lack of trust between civil society and the security sector,** in particular in places with a history of abuse or conflict;

– **Lack of opportunity to participate** in security policy development and implementation can make it difficult for civil society to access key decision-makers to influence security and justice policies and programming.

What to read next

On public oversight of the security sector:
– Augustin Loada and Ornella Moderan
   Tool 6: Civil Society Involvement in Security Sector Reform and Governance
   In Toolkit for Security Sector Reform and Governance in West Africa, edited by Ornella Moderan
   Geneva: DCAF, 2015.

– Eden Cole, Kerstin Eppert and Katrin Kinzelbach (eds.)
   Public Oversight of the Security Sector: A Handbook for Civil Society Organizations
   DCAF, UNDP, 2008.

On the role of civil society in security:
– Marina Caparini, Philipp Fluri and Ferenc Molnar (eds.)
   Civil Society and the Security Sector: Concepts and Practices in New Democracies
   Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2006.

Case studies on the role of public oversight of security:
– Chandra D. Bhatta
   Security Sector Reform and the Role of Oversight Agencies: Parliament, Civil Society and Media
   In Changing Security Dynamics in Nepal:
   A Collection of Essays, edited by Rajan Bhattarai and Rosy Cave
   Kathmandu: Nepal Institute for Policy Studies;
   London: Saferworld, 2009.

– Denise Garcia
   Not Yet a Democracy: Establishing Civilian Authority over the Security Sector in Brazil – Lessons for Other Countries in Transition
   Third World Quarterly, 35(3), 2014: 487-504.

– Paul Jackson and Peter Albrecht (eds.)
   Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone 1997–2007: Views from the Front Line
   Geneva: DCAF, 2010.

– Diana Garcia and others
   Transcending the Long Path: Recommendations for the Security of Rural Women in Colombia
   Bogota: Corporation for Research, Social and Economic Action (CIASE); Geneva: DCAF, 2018.

On contributions of civil society:
– John Gaventa and Gregory Barrett
   So What Difference does it Make? Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement
   IDS Working Paper 347. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2010.

– Karen Barnes and Peter Albrecht
   Tool 9: Civil Society Oversight of the Security Sector and Gender
   In Gender and SSR Toolkit, edited by Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek
   DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, 2008.

More DCAF resources

– DCAF publishes a wide variety of tools, handbooks and guidance on all aspects of SSR and good SSG, available free-for-download at **www.dcaf.ch**
   Many resources are also available in languages other than English.

– The DCAF-ISSAT Community of Practice website makes available a range of online learning resources for SSR practitioners at **http://issat.dcaf.ch**

Notes

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