

Security Sector Reform: Limitations and Prospects of the Scholarly Debate

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Abstract *This article seeks to critically assess the current scholarly debate on security sector reform (SSR). The article contributes to the development of research in this field by examining limitations and prospects of the literature on SSR. It is argued that the academic debate on SSR is limited due to its focus on domestic state actors and institutions. Further research should move beyond a state-centric approach to including perspectives of non-state providers of security as well as recipients of these services. Donor-driven reform narratives should be critically re-evaluated on the basis of the actual adaption on the ground. New approaches to SSR include in-depth qualitative research on layered, mixed or hybrid security orders in domestic reform contexts.*

Keywords: security sector reform, post-conflict statebuilding, state-centrism, local ownership, hybrid security orders

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Introduction

Within a short period of time, security sector reform has evolved into an increasingly popular, yet ambiguous and contested concept of international post-conflict statebuilding efforts (Hänggi, 2004: 1). Its rapid development is a consequence of increased international involvement in fragile and conflict-affected states. SSR is at the core of attempts to improve internal security as a precondition for sustainable peace (Schroeder & Chappuis 2014: 133). Its overarching goals follow a dual emphasis of creating effective, affordable and efficient security forces within a framework of democratic oversight and the rule of law (Andersen, 2011: 9; Schnabel & Born, 2011: 11). Despite the rapid diffusion of SSR into the strategic guidelines of international actors engaged in peace and statebuilding (e.g. OECD-DAC, 2007), there is a considerable gap between its theoretical framework and actual practical

applicability (**Schnabel & Born 2011: 6f.**). Furthermore, although SSR interventions are highly political and deeply contested processes, few in-depth analyses focus on their tensions and contradictions (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 133**).

The debate around SSR can be contextualised along contested strands in the scholarly literature. First, the SSR policy framework still relies heavily on the classical Weberian model of statehood as an exclusive reference to measure the success or failure of a mission (*ibid.*: 133f.). Critical scholars doubt the validity of such evaluations and emphasise that the effects of reform activities on local security governance are poorly understood (**Jackson, 2011: 1819**). The state-centrism of SSR programmes and donor templates is criticised for downplaying the relevance of non-state actors and the impact of informal, non-state norms and practices in security policymaking processes (**Ball & Hendrickson, 2009: 38**). Second, since its emergence as a cornerstone of bilateral and multilateral security assistance, research on SSR has focused on the related concept of local ownership, asking who controls and who should control the reform process in recipient countries of SSR. The answers to these questions range from a maximalist approach that favours a security sector managed entirely by local actors, to a minimalist approach that sees external actors in charge (**Mobekk, 2010: 231**). This literature review seeks to critically assess the current scholarly debate on SSR by examining its conceptual limitations and prospects for further research.

It is argued that the academic debate on SSR is stuck within the existing policy approach and limited due to its focus on state actors and institutions. Hence, there is a lack of studies that challenge the openly normative agenda of SSR or address the apparent state/non-state divide in SSR programme implementation. My findings suggest that further research on SSR should move beyond a state-centric approach to including perspectives of actors at the sub-state level such as non-state providers of security and justice as well as recipients of these services. Furthermore, current donor-driven reform narratives and theoretical categories should be critically re-evaluated on the basis of the actual adaption on the ground.

This review is structured as follows. Firstly, a summary of the current state of the art on SSR is presented. Secondly, the limitations of the SSR research agenda are examined, with a focus on state-centrism and the local ownership controversy. Thirdly, reflections on new approaches to SSR research that put an emphasis on mixed and hybrid security governance in recipient countries of donor-driven SSR are discussed. The

review concludes by presenting my main findings and suggestions for future research.

State of the Art

SSR is a relatively new concept. The term 'security sector reform' can be traced back only as far as the late 1990s (**Brzoska, 2003: 3**). The SSR concept has its origins within a distinct policy discourse, developed and promulgated by actors in the Western development community (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 134**). This new claim to competency by international development actors was accompanied by a general widening and deepening of the concept of security in the scholarly debate (**Brzoska, 2003: 4; Hänggi, 2004: 2**). Eventually, the proliferation of intra-state wars and subsequent 'state failures' induced the new security concept of human security. In contrast to traditional, state-centric concepts of security, this new approach puts a special emphasis on the growing importance of transnational, sub-national and individual security (**Hänggi, 2004: 2**). SSR adopts the human security approach, as it aspires to the creation of statehood as a means to people-centred security within the framework of Western liberalism (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 134**). However, while the human security approach of SSR emphasises the individual as the main referent object of security, the state remains the uncontested provider of security in the SSR agenda. Despite its relatively recent beginnings, the openly normative SSR agenda has become a central element of bilateral and multilateral donor assistance to fragile and conflict-affected states (*ibid.*: 135). This rapid development is due to dominant Western discourses that depict areas of limited statehood with a weak state monopoly of violence as a potential breeding ground for transnational terrorism and a threat to the international community (**Patrick, 2006**).

Actors, Scope and Activities

Egnell and Haldén put the motivation behind SSR in a nutshell by stating, '[p]oorly governed and unreformed security sectors in states are an obstacle to the promotion of sustainable development and democracy' (**Egnell & Haldén, 2009: 30**). The example of violent clashes between police and military forces in Timor-Leste in 2006 shows that inefficient and unaccountable security actors represent a core source of instability and insecurity in a country (**Brzoska, 2003: 48; Schroeder et al., 2013: 392**). SSR aims at reforming the roles and tasks of all state and non-state actors that contribute to the provision of security for the state and its people (**Schnabel & Born, 2011: 10**). The main objectives of SSR are twofold: reforms are designed to develop an operationally effective and

efficient security sector that is subject to civilian, democratic control within the framework of rule of law while respecting human rights (**Schroeder et al., 2014: 214**). Brzoska emphasises the importance of a single comprehensive understanding of both principles (**Brzoska, 2003: 31**). He forewarns that the performance of a security sector 'will fail to produce the desired outcome if oversight and control are deficient or defective' (*ibid.*). These two principles shape a deeply normative agenda for changing governance of the security sector in recipient countries (**Schroeder et al., 2014: 215**).

However, the definition of what constitutes a country's security sector is multi-faceted, continuously evolving and highly contested (**Hänggi, 2004: 4**). In particular, there has been a longstanding debate between narrow and broad definitions of the security sector and thus the scope of SSR. On the one hand, the narrow perspective is exclusively state-centric and focuses on militarised institutions authorised by the state to utilise force to protect the state and its citizens (**Egnell & Haldén, 2009: 31**; see further **Hänggi, 2004: 3**). Furthermore, the narrow definition includes public oversight bodies, which are predominantly the executive and the legislative authorities of the state. By contrast, the broad definition includes a human-centric focus and comprises the entire justice and law enforcement institutions as well as non-statutory security forces with whom donors rarely engage, such as liberation and guerrilla armies, militias and private security companies (**Jackson, 2011: 1811**; see further **Hänggi, 2004: 3**; **OECD-DAC, 2005: 20f.**).

Jackson asserts that scholarly consensus is currently in favour of the broader definition (**Jackson, 2011: 1811**), while the operational reality is still focused on the main state-actors of security. Brzoska criticises the broad approach, claiming that while the SSR concept may have grown in width, 'it has not grown in depth, in coherence and in clarity of objectives' (**Brzoska, 2003: 33**). Brzoska's critique can be exemplified by SSR in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where several donors are active in the field of SSR but carry out different activities targeting different actors within the same sector and using the same SSR label (**Jackson, 2011: 1812**).

The Divide between Theory and Practice

There is a wide range of conceptual challenges that seem to impede the translation of SSR mechanisms and principles into operational realities (**Scheye & Peake, 2005: 297**). Confirming this perception, Andersen states that the greatest successes of SSR are to be found in its policy formulations and templates, rather than actual implementation (**Andersen, 2011: 10**). Sedra provides a crushing verdict in his study on SSR in Afghanistan and Iraq, concluding that due to the geopolitical

significance of both cases, state security forces were strengthened without instilling robust civilian oversight mechanisms (**Sedra, 2007: 21**). Although SSR gained a huge visibility through these cases and was mainstreamed and embedded at the core of the Afghan and Iraqi statebuilding projects, Sedra dismisses it as a model in crisis which is unsuccessful in translating theory into practice (*ibid.*: **7; 20**).

Sedra's verdict can be traced back to Chanaa's seminal book *Security Sector Reform: Issues, Challenges and Prospects*, in which she argues that the majority of studies on SSR underplay the concept's key problems and limitations (**2002: 30f.**). Referred to as a "conceptual-contextual divide", Chanaa criticises the research imbalance between normative conceptual knowledge and an understanding about the actual situation in the field that inhibits the effective design and implementation of SSR programmes (**Chanaa 2002: 61; Egnell & Haldén, 2009: 33**). Numerous other scholars have followed her lead in criticising the conceptual-contextual divide in SSR research (see e.g. **Brzoska, 2003; Hänggi, 2004; Scheye & Peake, 2005; Sedra, 2007; Jackson, 2011**).

Hänggi concretises the 'contextual dimension' by referring to a country's historical conditions, the level of economic development, the nature of the political system and the respective security environment that have an influence on the pattern of the reform process (**Hänggi, 2004: 6**). Egnell and Haldén add that scholarly attempts to contextualise the SSR process in the recipient country have entirely focused on the conflict prior to the external intervention and the conduct of intervention itself, while neglecting the existing structures of state, society and polity (**Egnell & Haldén, 2009: 28f.**). Solely technocratic and prescriptive SSR efforts, which lack the proper understanding of the reform environment, entail failing on a political level and making fragile situations worse due to potential unintended consequences (*ibid.*; see further **Schroeder, 2010**).

Qualitative case studies contribute to the development of more theoretically sound foundations for the impact of SSR on transition processes in post-conflict societies (**Schnabel & Born, 2011: 62**). However, Schroeder and Chappuis find out that while the number of case studies on SSR has grown, most writing on the topic has remained within the existing policy approach, focusing on ways to improve external strategies of implementation (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 135**). As a result, to date relatively little is understood about how SSR is and should be implemented in practice. Attempts to overcome the conceptual-contextual divide remain limited in scope as the majority of studies merely propose to put SSR programming into local context without further specifying this recommendation. This paper argues that the term *contextualisation* should not be taken as an empty panacea that

guarantees SSR programmes to work out as long as the local context is considered. Instead, in-depth qualitative research should move beyond the conventional SSR approach and should focus on the interaction dynamics of external and domestic actors as well as domestic interactions between state and non-state actors.

Limitations of the SSR Research Agenda

SSR is a deeply political process, since it is about the allocation and distribution of scarce resources, the exercise and control of power as well as the struggle for legitimacy and authority (**Donais, 2008: 16**). The magnitude of this statement becomes clear with regard to two main differences between the SSR research agenda and its implementation in the operational reality around the globe. Firstly, there is a tension between the state-centrism of conventional SSR programmes and the particular societal realities of fragmented state- and non-state authorities in fragile states (**Andersen, 2011: 12**). Secondly, although the concept of local ownership has become a cornerstone in SSR research and donor policy, there is neither consensus on the precise content of the term, nor an agreement on who should control, implement and evaluate SSR programmes on the ground (**Donais, 2008: 3; Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 137**).

State-Centrism

State-Centrism is an unresolved problem in SSR research and practice. Although numerous studies and donor templates emphasise the importance of including non-state actors such as civil society organisations and traditional leaders into the reform process (see e.g. **OECD-DAC, 2005: 35**), SSR is often based on an exclusive engagement with main state actors such as political and security sector leadership (**Mobekk, 2010: 231**). Accordingly, there is the tendency to think of the state as the primary security actor, whether or not it actually has, or ever did have, a monopoly of violence (**Ball & Hendrickson, 2009: 38**). This state-centrism and concurrent one-size-fits-all models to SSR would downplay the impact of informal, non-state norms and practices in security policymaking processes (*ibid.*). In a case study on SSR in Sierra Leone, Denney argues that the stringent state/non-state distinction of SSR research and practice does not reflect the realities on the ground (**Denney, 2014: 251**). Instead, she argues that fragile and conflict-affected countries of the “global South” are characterised by plural security and justice orders and consist of a multitude of different actors. Denney emphasises that there is indeed a high degree of awareness among scholars and practitioners that security and justice are provided

by a multitude of different state- and non-state actors in the 'global South' (*ibid.*). Thus, the apparent disregard for non-state security and justice providers is not explained by mere ignorance on the part of SSR policy and research. Instead, it reflects a deliberate decision in favour of focusing efforts and resources on supporting local state actors and building Western-like state institutions, while repressing the influence of non-state actors (*ibid.*: 253-255).

Given the often fragmented and hybrid security actors in reforming or post-conflict states, Mannitz (2014: 271) assesses the exclusive focus on formal security institutions in the SSR process as a one-sided investment. Although researchers and practitioners of SSR acknowledge the conventional focus on formal security institutions and suggest that the donor community should actively seek 'alternative stakeholders in order to better facilitate and decentralise the intended security transformations' (*ibid.*: 272), attempts at overcoming this state-centrism face complex challenges. Firstly, it is impossible for intergovernmental aid or United Nations activities to bypass existing national authorities. Only private initiatives or NGOs are able to widen their scope to include non-state actors into the SSR process (*ibid.*: 271f.). Secondly, the inclusion of the informal sector of justice and security requires a thorough understanding of social and cultural dynamics in the given reform or post-conflict context. Thirdly, focusing on non-state providers of justice and security bears the risk of 'becoming engaged with informal groups and institutions whose legitimacy is in many cases not less questionable than that of their formal counterparts' (*ibid.*: 272). Disputes on whether to include non-state providers of justice and security into reform processes or not reveal existing tensions between the ambitions of critical scholars and practitioners and complex realities on the ground.

Local Ownership

The concept of local ownership depicts one of the most disputed and ambiguous topics of research on external interventions in general and SSR in particular. At its core, the discourse around local ownership is about fundamental questions of agency: 'who decides, who controls, who implements, and who evaluates?' (Donais, 2008: 3). Although the concept has become a standard vocabulary in the field of SSR, there is no consensus on the precise content and implications of the term (Bendix & Stanley, 2008: 101; Mobekk, 2010: 230). As Schroeder and Chappuis (2014: 137) put it, local ownership is either romanticised to the point of abstraction or else described as a problem to be overcome. The latter testifies an ongoing and widespread unease with the idea that the SSR process should be owned and managed by local actors (*ibid.*). In SSR practice, the quest for local ownership is corresponded to in a way that

at best national state elites become involved in the programmes of international donors (**Mannitz, 2014: 274**). However, consultation and participation are not local ownership – it merely means that external actors seek to convince compliant local stakeholders of their agenda and principles (**Mobekk, 2010: 231**).

In its current usage, the term is neither an analytical category, nor an operational benchmark. It has a limited influence on the reform process, but more as a legitimising tool for donor-driven policies than as an actual goal to achieve (**Bendix & Stanley, 2008: 102**). Scholars like Nathan (**2007**) and Baker (**2010**) declare themselves in favour of sustainably addressing non-state agencies, which is in their view indispensable for a functioning security sector (**Baker, 2010: 208**). As Nathan emphasises, ‘what is required is not local support for donor programmes and projects but rather donor support for programmes and projects initiated by local actors’ (**Nathan, 2007: 4**). This ambitious call has been met with scepticism, as many local actors might regard change and reform as a direct challenge to their power, as Scheye and Peake point out (**Scheye & Peake, 2005: 307**). Accordingly, it would be somewhat naïve to believe that local owners, either in state institutions or non-state actors, will implicitly welcome a SSR process (*ibid.*: 309).

The previous sections show that the current research on SSR is limited due to an ongoing state-centrism and an ambiguous usage of the concept of local ownership. The questions of which local actors to include in reforms of the security sector and to what extent local stakeholders should “own” the reform process is at the heart of ongoing tensions and limitations in SSR research. As Mannitz observes, the ongoing emphasis in SSR research ‘on the process (instead of the outcome) and on the inclusion of informal groups (as opposed to purely state-centric reform endeavours) has given rise to renewed quests for an empirically informed localization of interventions that begins with an analysis of political reality’ (**Mannitz 2014: 273**).

In this vein, conventional SSR practices are challenged through new approaches to SSR research that explicitly take the fragmented nature of post-conflict states into account and try to shed light on empirically unexplored processes of everyday interactions in SSR programmes.

New Approaches to SSR Research

There are noteworthy examples of new approaches to SSR research that appeared in latest publications on the topic. Various authors make the case for moving beyond a state-centric, donor-driven approach to focussing on interaction dynamics between external and domestic actors (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 133**). In a recently published special issue

on new perspectives on SSR, Schroeder and Chappuis call for a closer engagement with layered, mixed or hybrid security orders that can result from external intervention in domestic reform contexts (*ibid.*; see further **Schroeder et al., 2014; Boege et al., 2009**).ⁱ

The second is that it is a socio-cultural problem of the affluent Western nations in the post-war period, a metaphorical acting out of the unreasonable expectations women are supposed to satisfy. The third is that we are witnessing an ‘epidemic’ of this ‘disease’ among young women in Western societies (**Makino et al., 2004; Pike et al., 2015**).

Hybrid security orders depict the latest attempt to grasp the realities of security provision in post-conflict or fragile states, where SSR initiatives lead to a piecemeal and partial diffusion of different sets of organizational structures, technical capacities and security norms (**Schroeder et al., 2014: 216**). Hybrid security in this sense implies the merging of overarching norms, organizational structures and day-to-day practices that derive from different governance systems and may conflict with each other (*ibid.*: 217). Specifically, hybridization of security governance can include cases where ‘domestic actors have brought the organizational structures and technical capacities of a service in line with international standards, but without parallel changes in the normative basis of security governance’ (*ibid.*). These normative changes include adherence to international human right norms or the implementation of civilian, democratic control of the security sector.

In my opinion, the concept of hybridity illustrates an important step in the right direction. Firstly, it invalidates the one-size-fits-all-approach of earlier SSR programmes and sheds light on the empirically underexplored process dimension of everyday interactions between donors and recipients (**Mannitz, 2014: 281**). As part of these everyday interactions, Mannitz emphasises ‘the systemic imbalance of power, the tendency that donors are mostly sceptical of domestic capabilities and, as a result of this, tend to act around or *for* “the locals” rather than *with* them’ (*ibid.*, italics in original). Hills adds that the emergence of hybrid security orders calls for in-depth analyses of the ties, transactions and norms underpinning the non-liberal societies that shall receive SSR (**Hills, 2014: 165**).

Secondly, the scholarly focus on hybridity may have a decisive influence on the local ownership discourse, as new questions of agency arise. Schroeder & Chappuis (**2014: 138**) argue that instead of focusing on the imprecise notion of local ownership, research that offers insights into the domestic politics in non-OECD states can reveal and explain the consequences of external interventions. By comparing the different security sector reforms in Liberia, Timor-Leste and the Palestinian

Territories, Schroeder *et al.* (2014: 227) show that domestic actors in all cases adopted external reforms only selectively and shaped the consequences of externally driven attempts at reform. Hence, the simplistic assumptions of a local “terra nullius” without any prior forms of social and political organisations increasingly yield to a focus on the domestic political and social systems of SSR recipient states (Schroeder & Chappuis 2014: 139).

A related topic of the concept of hybridity is the increasing attention to non-state security actors as actual stakeholders of reform processes and outcomes. Control over the security sector is often contested among different domestic groups and the provision of security does often exceed the capabilities of formal state actors (Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 138). Scheye and Peake (2005), Baker (2010) and Denney (2014) argue that in certain societies, family, kinship and tribal ties must be included for successfully analysing and approaching the overall security sector. In the case of Sierra Leone, Denney (2014: 258) shows that only a small part of the country’s security sector has benefited from donor-supported SSR due to its state-centric conceptual horizon. Dominant non-state providers of security such as chiefs and secret societies could not participate in the programmes at all, while the formal, state-provided security sector remains largely inaccessible to the majority of the population (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, the increasing focus on non-state actors faces challenges in its practical implementation. Non-state actors are more difficult to reach for external actors, they may not possess legitimacy among the local population and they might regard, similar to state actors, change and reform as a direct challenge to their power (Mannitz 2014: 171f.; Scheye & Peake, 2005: 307; Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 137). Furthermore, Andersen points out that the emphasis of working with informal, non-state institutions and power holders entails the clear risk of losing the transformative power of the SSR-agenda and simply reproducing the existing unfair power structures (Andersen, 2011: 15).

Conclusion

The concept of SSR has experienced a rapid development. It emerged as an ambitious and complex agenda in the time of post-Cold War political liberalisation that has created the opportunity for change in many developing and transition countries (Ball & Hendrickson, 2009: 40). Since its very beginnings, the international donor community has played a leading role in formulating research priorities and promulgating the extensive normative framework of the SSR concept.

The main argument of this article is that the academic debate on SSR is still stuck within the existing policy approach and limited due to its focus on state actors and institutions. Hence, there is still an apparent divide between SSR theory and actual practical applicability. This divide is reflected in the difficulties of operationalizing SSR and adapting it to local contexts (**Schroeder & Chappuis, 2014: 135**), a lack of systematic analyses of the consequences of interventions (**Hills, 2014: 165**) and problems of translating principles such as the local ownership concept into reality. My findings suggest that further research on SSR should include perspectives of actors at the sub-state level such as non-state providers of security and justice as well as recipients of these services. As Schroeder *et al.* (**2014: 227**) show with regard to selective adoption of SSR by local actors, current donor-driven reform narratives should be critically re-evaluated on the basis of the actual resonance on the ground.

Only recently has the scholarly debate begun to develop concepts beyond the conventional SSR approach. Instead of adopting a mere state-centric perspective on SSR, various scholars have sought to broaden the scope of research towards the interaction dynamics of external and domestic actors as well as domestic interactions between formally state and non-state actors. The once dominant practice of neglecting non-state providers of security and justice provides fertile ground for new and innovative approaches in the field. This review yields several impulses for future research and revisions of current research designs.

Firstly, with regard to adequate research designs to account for more systematic analyses of SSR activities in different recipient states, I would propose to further intensify in-depth qualitative analyses including perspectives of actors on three levels of action: the international level, the state level of the recipient country and the sub-state level including actual providers of security and justice as well as “end users” of these services. Secondly, recent research on hybrid security orders reveals that local stakeholders adopt international norms and standards either selectively or not at all (Schroeder *et al.*, 2014: 228). Hence, future studies should comparatively focus on those techniques and standards that actually have been adopted in specific recipient countries. Accordingly, current donor-driven reform narratives and theoretical categories should also be critically re-evaluated on the basis of the actual adoption on the ground.

Within a short period of time the concept of SSR has been extensively hailed and equally sharply criticised. Scholars and practitioners alike face complex challenges such as unresolved questions of agency and ownership as well as the lack of success stories in various recipient countries. An ongoing divide between SSR research and practice has

revealed the limits of donor-driven research focusing on established actors and concepts. However, recent contributions to this field of research are promising. After more than a decade since the concept of SSR was first introduced, the scholarly debate seems to turn away from limited perspectives on external interests towards a greater emphasis on local perspectives and dynamics.

ⁱ In this case, the concept of hybridity implies the outcome of interactions between external and internal actors.

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