

Think Piece No. 2

Encouraging open debate: the essential role of civil society and media in good security governance

*Prepared by Fairlie Chappuis (DCAF) for the
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The challenge

Civil society activism and constructive media engagement with security affairs are essential to democratic security governance because their role in public oversight helps to ensure the security sector is accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public. **Civil society is defined as all groups that engage in voluntary collective action in the public interest**, which includes conventional advocacy actors like non-governmental, not-for-profit organisations, such as trusts, foundations, and charities, as well as a broader range of stakeholders in public security such as grass-roots community-, identity-, or faith-based organisations; commercial interests with a social agenda such as unions, trade associations or social businesses; and autonomous governmental organisations with mandates to serve the public interest independently; as well as research and education institutions such as universities or think tanks whether public or private.

Where civil society and media values align with the principles of democratic security governance, human rights and rule of law, civil society and media can be powerful advocates for and agents of SSR. Yet although civil society activism and media engagement have proven decisive to improvements in security governance at different times in a number of countries, the potential for African civil society and media to leverage popular demands for improved SSG has been undermined by a number of factors common across a variety of African contexts.

Implications for SSR/G

Secrecy and fear surrounding security issues: A potent legacy of autocratic government is the fear and intimidation created around security affairs including the impression that security is an issue that only a narrow political and security elite have the right to address. This reticence to address security affairs in public discussion lingers when a weak security sector fails to protect rights to free association and speech.

Poor appreciation of the role of civil society and media in public oversight: The fact that democratic security governance requires critical perspectives, open discussion and public dialogue is often underappreciated by security institutions, government authorities and elected representatives, donors and even civil society and media stakeholders themselves. While democratic control and oversight is usually insufficient in the implementation of SSR, the role of civil society and media in public governance is often poorly understood and neglected completely.

Low level of knowledge on security issues: Partly in consequence of the fact that security and political elites have treated national and public security affairs as their reserved domain, there have often been few opportunities for civil society and media to learn about the security sector. This lack of knowledge creates a lack of confidence to engage with security governance that restricts every aspect of civil society activism. Security officials also use lack of knowledge as a pretence to rationalise further exclusion of civil society and media. At the same time, civil society and media may not immediately recognise the links between security governance and their focussed advocacy in areas such as human rights, rule of law, corruption or public service delivery.

Need to temper advocacy with constructive engagement: Civil society movements borne of legitimate grievances in difficult political contexts often have tense relationships with state security sector authorities. Adversarial positions can escalate tensions making it more difficult to arrive at pragmatic policy solutions; at the same time, seeking constructive engagement with the security sector can also hold reputational risks for civil society.

Absence of coordinated civil society approaches: Civil society activism and media advocacy are often most effective when a number of organisations pool their human, financial and reputational resources in an organised platform or campaign focussed on a well-defined agenda. Yet a lack of knowledge, organisational capacity and narrow political space continue to pose barriers to such organised and coordinated public advocacy in many contexts.

Scarce local resources force reliance on external perspectives: Scarcity of local and national resources for civil society activism and media engagement can feed a de facto reliance on external strategy, research, analysis and organisation. Ensuring the sustainability of local and national civil society and media outlets is thus critical to fostering the emergence of effective public security oversight.

Entry points for engagement

Promote a culture of openness in security affairs: Shifting from a state- to a people-centred vision of state security provision requires changes in attitudes and behaviours both within the state security sector as well as among civil society and media stakeholders, as well as the population at large. Civil society and media have a critical role to play in raising awareness, sharing information, and promoting participatory approaches to SSR.

Identify emergent civil society interest in security affairs and support development of core competencies for sustainable engagement: Increasing knowledge about security governance can help civil society and media understand the relevance of security to their core agendas and have exponential effects in every area of civil society activism including state-society communication; monitoring and watch dogging; service provision; fact finding, research and analysis; agenda setting and advocacy; and, representation. Directing support to internal governance and organisational capacity as well as long term funding sources is critical for organisations to engage in independent critique of sensitive security issues on a sustainable basis.

Foster constructive civil society and media criticism – both by and towards CSOs and media: Where public critique tends towards sensationalism, particular interests or zero-sum political calculations, it can cause or escalate conflict and even lead to violence. Striking a balance between credible critique and constructive problem-solving requires a degree of mutual trust and understanding between state, civil society and media stakeholders. Dialogue and deeper knowledge in the context of long term cooperation can build bridges that help to create more conciliatory state-society relations and a more conducive environment for civil society and media to engage in public security sector oversight.

Promote the necessary legal and institutional conditions for public security oversight: Certain legal and institutional conditions are critical enablers of civil society and media engagement with national and public security: freedom of information laws and clear schedules for classification and release of information are essential tools for transparency and participation while protection of freedom of association and speech are essential to effective organising.

Foster emergence of broader based platforms by supporting more effective organising, networking and coalition-building: Linking international, regional, national and local activists in organised networks to form larger, more focussed platforms for action distributes the risk of engaging in public security oversight while also improving the human, financial and reputational resources available to do so. Encouraging open, inclusive and transparent public dialogue on security affairs as a matter democratic rights and human security can help to create an enabling environment that will eventually lead to a shift in public attitudes towards security.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the barriers to more effective national and local civil society and media engagement with security issues and how can they be overcome?
2. What are necessary criteria for effective support to local civil society and media from external and national/local perspectives?
3. How can impact be defined at local and national levels and for external support and what difference does context make?
4. What are the important distinctions to be made in supporting national civil society compared to media?