Towards a regional agenda for security sector governance and reform: Opportunities and challenges for the African Union and ECOWAS

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The challenge

African countries are confronted with a regionalisation of threats, which calls for coordinated responses. As leading actors in regional integration, the African Union (AU) and regional economic communities (RECs) have a critical role to play in creating space for member states to share their SSR experiences and agree on common standards for good security sector governance. This role extends from the facilitation of regional policy and norms development, to the provision of political and technical support to member states committed to transforming dysfunctional security structures into efficient and accountable institutions.

Major steps forward have been made with the emergence of an agreed framework for African SSR in the form of the African Union Policy Framework on Security Sector Reform (2013), as well as the work of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to develop a common normative framework – comprising a Code of Conduct for Armed Forces and Security Services of ECOWAS (2011) and a Policy Framework for Security Sector Reform and Governance (2016) – to strengthen democratic governance, peace and security in West Africa.

These frameworks provide a high normative standard, consistent with international standards for good security sector governance. However, the transposition of theoretical standards and normative prescriptions into practice remains a challenge. There is also a gap in norms development between ECOWAS and the other RECs. Moreover, beyond norms setting, regional organisations are challenged to provide member states with multidimensional support which may also include political, financial and technical support. This poses a number of questions in terms of their own mandates and capacities; it also raises issues as concerns the coordination of SSR support provided at international, continental, sub-regional levels.

Implications for SSR/G

Normative convergence facilitates coordinated action: By developing a coherent set of regional norms for good security sector governance, ECOWAS seeks to equip member states with actionable guidelines on how to improve the governance of their security sector, in a way that enhances the efficiency and accountability of security institutions across the region. An underlying assumption is that normative convergence contributes to consolidate the ground for operational coordination among West African states increasingly facing common, transnational threats. To what extent does experience confirm this assumption?

Contextualising international discourse on SSR: SSR assumes that in order to be effective international norms and standards must be contextualised. Thus while operating in threatening and high-stakes environments, West African states are challenged to dismiss ineffective colonial legacies and invent new, fundamentally home-grown governance systems capable of both state and human security. To what extent do regional level policy processes provide a space for African states to actually redefine concepts of and standards for SSR, as opposed to replicating existing frameworks? What are indicators of – and limitations to – member states' ownership over regional agendas on SSR?

National ownership, regional support: What key principles should guide the AU and RECs in the provision of SSR support to their member states? How can regional support effectively promote and reinforce national ownership of SSR processes? What lessons can be learnt from AU and ECOWAS' efforts to coordinate their support to member states?

Moving from theory to practice: There is a long-standing history of non-observance by West African states of ECOWAS' normative instruments. Arguably, the processes through which these instruments are developed and adopted affect their level of ownership – and subsequent observance – by West African states and societies. To what extent have these lessons of experience informed the policy development process for SSR related guidelines?

Entry points for engagement

Building on the momentum: The ECOWAS Policy Framework for SSRG – the cornerstone of a normative architecture on the rise – was finally endorsed by Heads of States in June 2016, after nearly seven years of policy development and negotiations between member states. While the adoption of this Policy represents an institutional achievement in itself, it is yet to produce changes that will positively impact the security of millions of West African women, men, boys and girls. Open distribution of the policy will help to raise awareness around it both within security establishments and in the wider public, and make it an effective tool for reforms at country level. Active involvement of West African civil society to remind states of their commitments and hold them to account for policy implementation can also reinforce incentives to take this agenda forward.

Foster regional capacities for policy implementation: The AU has developed Operational Guidance Notes to facilitate the implementation of its continental Policy Framework for SSR, and the ECOWAS has commissioned the development of a Toolkit for SSRG in West Africa. However, additional human resources, the strengthening of local capacities and networking of regional expertise will be necessary for West African societies to make the most of regional frameworks at a national level.

Reinforce AU-ECOWAS coordination: Beyond policy alignment, it is important for AU and ECOWAS to continue creating opportunities for joint planning and delivery of support to Member states. Coordination efforts should also extend to the development and dissemination of specific material aimed at facilitating policy implementation by member states and their national stakeholders.

Address the gap in norms development between ECOWAS and the other RECs: Taking the lead for developing a continental Policy Framework on SSR, the AU has provided common ground for RECs to develop complementary policy guidance adapted to their particular sub-regional contexts. So far, the ECOWAS has been most active in this area, creating a gap with other RECs. While several factors contribute to explaining this gap, there are also perspectives for reducing it. For instance, the Economic Community of West African States (ECCAS) has expressed interest in developing a regional policy framework of its own. The issue has also been on the SADC agenda for some years, although delayed by a number of political and institutional challenges. A more homogenous development of sub-regional corpuses may reinforce the impact of the AU policy framework across the continent and deeper enroot to good SSG norms.

Support national conversations to determine the direction of transformative reforms that take into account the specific needs of women, men, boys and girls in a given context, rather than reinforce a fundamentally dysfunctional system through technocratic approaches to reform.

Emphasise the governance dimension of reforms: Reform approaches should neither be limited to post-conflicts settings, nor to the traditionally targeted defence and other "hard security" sectors. Instead, they should be reoriented towards home-grown demand for more effective justice, rule of law, accountability and better quality delivery of public services by security institutions. They should also plan to strengthen the capacity of civilian stakeholders responsible for managing and overseeing the security sector, such as Parliaments, National Ombuds institutions and Human Rights Commissions, Anti-corruption agencies, courts, civil society including women's organisations and human rights defenders, and the media.

Open space for democratic involvement in security matters, through gender equality: At both AU and RECs levels, regional agendas for inclusive and democratic governance of the security sector will require a commitment to gender equality: unless men and women have equal access to security professions and services, there can be no equality before the law nor inclusive and representative democratic governance. Gender equality is also essential to effective and accountable security provision. A security sector that practises discrimination or only takes into account the security needs of some of the population is neither effective nor accountable.

Questions for discussion:
1. How do regional dynamics affect the development of common agendas for SSR/G?
2. How can other RECs benefit from the experience of ECOWAS? What role can interregional dialogue and cooperation play?
3. How can states best transpose regional norms into effective practices which advance human, national and regional security?
4. How can regional agendas on SSR help assert and operationalise the role of civilian stakeholders and the importance of gender equality in democratic governance and reform of the security sector?