



THE INTERNATIONAL SECURITY SECTOR ADVISORY TEAM  
THE GENEVA CENTRE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF ARMED FORCES

# Media & SSR – a practical note for enhancing reforms



## Media & SSR – a practical note for enhancing reforms

The media landscape has changed dramatically over the last two decades. For the relationship between media and the security sector, this change has been twofold. First, there has been an unprecedented expansion of access to news and other information, the instant visibility of local events to a global audience, the increased possibilities for citizen and civil society participation in the news cycle. Secondly, there has been a growing change in public expectation regarding what citizens want from security, that they wish to be fully informed and consulted on security implications for them, and so we have seen a growing debate over personal and media freedoms vs national security, and how these are maintained.

### *Partners in responsibility*

The relationship of media with the security sector and the role and responsibilities that both play in informing the public impacts on the core of democratic good governance, whether it is through the curtailment of freedom of expression and information, or through the securitisation of agendas, programmes, and discourse linked to counterterrorism. One heated example of the difficult role of both parties, for instance, is the debate on personal freedom in the face of mass surveillance and data collection. Another emerging example which is much less well understood or discussed in the media, is that if more police are put into counter-terrorism by taking them off community patrol this puts less effort into prevention, of which a perverse second order consequence is an increase in the need for counter-terrorism measures<sup>1</sup>.

Support to SSR considered in this note focus on news media (albeit the media landscape is far more complex, acknowledging that other sources of information are pertinent to SSR). Beyond limitations to, and repression of freedom of, information and expression, media capacity to understand SSR approach and goals is often overlooked as an area often needing support in reform contexts. Media might lack a nuanced understanding of their own role in civilian oversight of the broad security sector, either as direct participants or as an enabler of external oversight and participation mechanisms. This gap reflects negatively on reform outcomes. Democratic governance is predicated on accountability, integrity and transparency, and media are a central element of such mechanisms. Media curtailed on their freedom or short on their capacity will limit broad ownership of SSR and likely distort the underlying political process.

### *Beyond messaging*

We need to go beyond a classic strategic engagement with media (mostly for advocacy or publicity). Potential media impacts on public perceptions of security and justice should be embedded into policy and programming theories of change, shifting from messaging as a mere communicational

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<sup>1</sup> This 'vicious circle' is described for instance in HMIC [Policing in Austerity: Meeting the Challenge](#), p36.



output to messaging as one of the components of institutional behavioral change towards a service outcome:

1. Shifting from crisis messaging (focus on problems) to full narratives of change from the perspectives of all stakeholders advocating and supporting reform, by presenting solutions *and* explaining how they will work better than existing ones;
2. Shifting from building the media capacity that merely reports on events and individuals (output-oriented), to building media capacity that understands security contexts and trends (outcome-oriented): i.e. balancing visibility with learning.

### *The question of role*

Media are a central component of democratic oversight, monitoring, raising awareness, providing public accountability, and providing transparency through disclosure and investigation. The media are a security stakeholder on their own, shaping security policy and practice. Media are crucial to build partnerships/networking, and are powerful mediators between security actors, oversight bodies and civil society organisations and interest groups (from which news media are fundamentally different in nature, intent, and *modus operandi*).

### *The challenge of media capacity*

The media need to understand concepts and mechanisms of democratic governance. The transparency and access are worth little from an SSR perspective if media don't have the resources and the tools to make full sense of them. A robust understanding of SSR greatly enhances the quality of news and analyses of security, politics, and importantly of conflict dynamics. As an example of media-focused SSR programming, DCAF developed tools for Indonesian journalists to be able to conduct informed research, analysis and monitoring on key security sector oversight, transparency and accountability issues. The engagement with Indonesian media was part of a broader programme strengthening parliamentary and civil society democratic security sector oversight capacity.

### *Key entry-points from an SSR perspective:*

1. Consultations: media are key to both inform and channel the expectations and issues of citizens, communities, and excluded groups;
2. Assessment of legal framework:
  - Extent and quality of freedom of information;
  - Status of access to official documents (e.g. using open government index indicators like OECD's) and of "public interest", both crucial to transparency;
  - Whistleblower protection;
  - Rules and practice of classification (e.g. extension/over-classification).
3. Oversight opportunities with media involvement (coverage of Parliament, Defence, Police, Justice, proceedings etc.) to build the capacity of media to monitor the formal democratic oversight functions of the security sector.
4. Budget reporting as crucial lever of democratic governance;
5. Integration of media as a formal/informal Monitoring & Evaluation mechanism for SSR programming.



6. Assessment of the intelligence framework and (potential) intelligence reform:
  - Classification of information (who does it, who enforces it, who sanctions it – and who uses it?);
  - Legal definition of crimes against the security of the State;
  - Ultimate control over wireless communications (State vs operator);
  - Legal framework of surveillance (including of Internet traffic and wireless data);
  - Vetting: which regulation for media access to public but confidential archives (e.g. of staff serving past regimes, lists of human rights perpetrators, etc.).

#### *Key entry points from a media perspective:*

1. Reforms happen over a long timeline. The first challenge of bringing media into SSR is to build the capacity of media to transcend the short term focus on incidents individuals and problems, and develop one focused on issues, context, and trends;
2. Information gaps usually go together with power gaps; acting on the former will likely impact positively on the latter. Reform is predicated on broader participation, which in turn depends on empowering excluded or marginal constituencies, to bring them into the political process where reform is shaped and sustained;
3. Frames (or the angle and perception taken when presenting an issue) matter: research shows that support for long-term change (as SSR) depends less on what news *say* and more on *how* they say it. Challenging entrenched beliefs or cultural models (e.g. incarceration is the best solution to reduce crime) requires reversing existing “patterns of expectation” about social issues formed over time – which is a lengthy and difficult process;
4. Solutions need to be unpacked, explaining how they improve outcomes – or they can be counterproductive (solutions-only messages can actually *depress* support for reform);
5. Decision-making is not an individual, purely rational act, but the result of a complex cultural and social process involving a larger community. Messages should be framed on that understanding, fully accounting for context, relations, and power dynamics;
6. The holistic dimension of SSR is best articulated and served by complete narratives of change and development; in that sense, reform proposals alone don’t speak for themselves, they need a full explanation of context, variables, and mechanisms.

#### *Selected DCAF resources*

- The Role of Media in Security Sector Governance: [A Toolkit for Trainers](#)
- [Media and the Security Sector in Southeast Asia](#)
- [Assessing the Role of Media](#) in Palestinian Security Sector Governance
- [Social Media Guide](#) for Ombuds Institutions of the Armed Forces