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Security Sector Reform and State Building

PAUL JACKSON

ABSTRACT This article argues that there is a close link between security sector reform (SSR) and state building. Focusing on UK approaches to state building and SSR, it argues that these are an extension of liberal models containing a number of assumptions about the nature of states and how they should be constructed and that any analysis of SSR approaches needs to be seen within a broader framework of the international community, which tends to see the replacement of ‘dysfunctional’ societies as desirable both for the people of those states and for the international community. As a result, state building has largely been carried out as a ‘technical-administrative’ exercise focusing on the technicalities of constructing and running organisations rather than on the politics of creating states, leading to a lack of overall political coherence in terms of where SSR is, or should be, going and of what kinds of state are being constructed. Politics is frequently cited by practitioners as representing a set of obstacles to be overcome to achieve SSR rather than a set of assumptions about actually doing it. The effect of development and security policies working closely together in insecure environments is an overarching emphasis on security at the expense of the harder, more long-term process of development.

This article argues that there is a close link between security sector reform (SSR) and state building. In addition, there are close links between these approaches and ‘liberal peace building’ which may be traced back to underlying assumptions about the nature of the state. The article’s focus on SSR necessarily leads to a focus on UK practice, since the UK has been a prominent exponent of SSR programming and sees it as part of its core mission of poverty alleviation. For some time the UK has seen security as a major part of its development focus and as a major threat to human security. Much of the UK’s focus on post-conflict security and the reconstruction of states stems from its experience in Sierra Leone from 1997 until the present. During this period the UK developed a system of cross-government working that integrated aspects of security and development into something that became known as SSR. While Sierra Leone was pivotal in showing that
military intervention (2000) could work, it was also representative of a broader move towards the integration of security and development that has influenced subsequent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, academic studies of SSR have been relatively few and have never been fully linked into the broader state-building debate or to the dialogue on liberal peace building. There has been much written about SSR from a policy perspective, but it has been subject to what Peake et al refer to as ‘benign analytical neglect’. As a result, much of the work on SSR has been very specific and focused on particular activities, rather than looking at broader interventions as an expression of, and in relation to, broader social and economic reform.

This article begins by outlining a view of state building that sees the process as firmly rooted in the tradition of constructing a liberal peace and, therefore, a liberal state. This reflects the broader approach of the international community, which tends to see the replacement of war-torn, ‘failed’ or ‘dysfunctional’ societies as being desirable both for the people of those states and for the international community of states more generally. This approach has largely been carried out as a ‘technical-administrative’ exercise with a focus on the technicalities of constructing and running organisations rather than on the politics of creating states.

The article goes on to point out that there are inherent contradictions in terms of the perceived drive towards policy coherence and a lack of overall political coherence in terms of where SSR is, or should be, going and therefore by extension of what kinds of state are being constructed. Politics is frequently cited by practitioners as representing a set of obstacles to be overcome in order to achieve SSR rather than a set of assumptions about actually doing SSR. The article further asserts that the net effect of development and security policies working closely together in insecure environments is an overarching emphasis on security at the expense of the harder and more long-term process of development. This can be clearly seen in the outcomes of 10 years of SSR in Sierra Leone and is currently being seen in Afghanistan.

The security sector may be defined as ‘all those organisations which have authority to use, or order the use of, force, or the threat of force, to protect the state and its citizens, as well as those civil structures that are responsible for their management and oversight’. SSR is a means of addressing this broad sector and has grown to incorporate the military, intelligence, police, penal and judicial systems. It aims both to improve the capabilities of the security sector and also to improving the accountability, oversight and governance of security institutions by civilian authorities. Thus SSR is a fundamental element of state building more broadly, since the provision of security and justice sit at the very centre of what states are. As such, SSR represents a window into the state-building process more broadly and into the underlying—and usually unwritten—assumptions that are made by international actors constructing states. The neglect of politics may lead to what Lemay-Hébert refers to as the ‘empty-shell’ approach, whereby the ‘one size fits all’ approach to building states may produce a state that operates in
favour of local elites, but lacks fundamental legitimacy with the wider population.9 This raises the question of whether a focus on security leads to a particular view of state building that privileges technical security institutions over political ones and whether it can construct states that are legitimate, sustainable or democratic.

Security, development and liberal state building

The World Bank, along with the UK Department for International Development (DFID), identifies a number of reasons why security should be incorporated into poverty reduction strategies.10 Importantly security is identified as a major issue by poor states themselves. While clearly there is an interest in declaring security to be an issue for a government in the current environment (particularly if you can define a terrorist threat), this is also backed up by the World Bank’s Voices of the Poor Survey, which showed that poor people themselves identify insecurity and access to justice as two core concerns.11 However, this relies on how exactly these people define security. In Sierra Leone, for example, there was a very clear change in local views of security in the post-conflict period from an immediate desire to stop the killing and re-establish order to more development-related concerns, including reduction in crime (particularly drug smuggling) and economic insecurity (particularly employment opportunities) as well as domestic and sexual violence.12

The World Bank study goes on to cite studies from Paul Collier that show how far conflict affects the economy, but then perhaps unsurprisingly moves on to identify security as a core government issue and as a public good and an issue of service delivery.

The experience of DFID in the late 1990s, informed by the collapse of Sierra Leone (explained in more detail below), led the UK to engage with the security sector, since the collapse of state security had been seen as a key driver of the conflict itself and of the inability of Sierra Leone to defend itself as a state.13 The policy statement Poverty and the Security Sector set out DFID’s commitment to SSR as a means of poverty reduction through the prevention of violence, the capacity to contain violent movements and the prevention of damaging long-term conflicts. In addition, it went on to outline the role of the security sector in crime prevention and counter-terrorism, which could also contribute to a positive development framework. However, it does raise questions about how far SSR is actually possible in the real world. As Broszka points out, SSR may be ‘sound in theory but problematic in practice’.14

This reflects a broader approach to state building which has guided the response of the international community to the phenomenon of failed states. There is a strong link between SSR and state building as a global project. In post-conflict contexts this is also linked closely with the idea of the ‘liberal peace’. At its simplest liberal ideology can be reduced to four core themes: individualism (assertion of individuals over social collectivities); egalitarianism (moral equivalence of individuals); universalism (moral unity having
primacy over historical association or cultural forms); and meliorism
(belief in the ability to improve all political and social institutions). All
these elements surround the core principle of individual freedom.\textsuperscript{15}

A liberal peace, therefore, exists when all of the above constitute normal
social relations and justice and liberty drive a social structure that is
inherently peaceful. Democracy and capitalism are seen as the vehicles for
peaceful competition underlying liberal structures and the normative
foundations of liberalism are encompassed in the liberal notion of human
rights.\textsuperscript{16} At their highest level these are the right to freedom from arbitrary
authority, the social rights necessary to protect and promote freedom and
the right to democratic participation to protect the first two. Consequently,
when international intervention is undertaken in the name of human rights,
it is entirely coherent to initiate a process of democratisation as a means of
developing social rights. Clearly it is the transfer of the political architecture
of the liberal state from Western liberal countries to non-liberal states in
the form of state building that leads to a tension between the presumed
pacific nature of liberalism and the issue of whether such structures really
are the political manifestation of the moral freedom of the local
populations.

This has led to a number of important developments in terms of state
building, not least the idea that an international liberal peace requires non-
liberal states to be liberalised in order for that peace to become sustainable.
Given the policy community’s focus on states, it is perhaps hardly
surprising that the main focus of international aid has been in trying to
support states that are weak and also in reconstructing states that are in
crisis or have collapsed entirely. There is a set of clear reasons for this, not
least of which is a concern with international security and the reliance on
an international state system of functioning states to carry out basic tasks.
The current international security environment also relies on states
to maintain existing international order, hence the development of
functioning security sectors within those states comes to the forefront of
this agenda.

In practice, however, the experience of state building has not been a happy
one. As mentioned above, the technical methodology of state building leads
to construction of entities that may look like states but in reality lack
legitimacy or capability. Examples such as Timor-Leste and Kosovo also
point to an externally-led UN approach that has incorporated local elites but
marginalised the majority of the population.\textsuperscript{17} In Iraq, the US attempted to
construct a Western-style state armed with a whole range of neoliberal state
theories that view the institutions of the state as almost separate from existing
politics. It dismantled the state that existed and started all over again,
constructing a new set of ahistorical institutions alien to the local
population—a process labelled a ‘McDonaldisation’ approach.\textsuperscript{18} Somalia is
the archetypal collapsed state but this is not simply a function of its own
history but also a problem of contemporary international relations,
particularly the universalisation of one model of the nation-state.\textsuperscript{19} These
examples show clearly that externally led, technocratic solutions have not
been successful at constructing states, yet the approach continues, despite significant criticism.20

In particular, much state building is dominated by the construction of exit strategies, which in turn is dominated by a ‘democratic election’ as the end-point. However, holding an election does not necessarily constitute state formation, even though the assumption is that democracies can be created in this way within project horizons. Aside from the broader challenges of creating multiparty democracy in a post-conflict situation, the real issues with Iraq lie in a fundamental misunderstanding of what the project of state building actually means in practice.

There is a strong literature on state building that is driven partly by a policy situation on the ground, as in Iraq and Afghanistan among other places.21 However, it rarely provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for state building and, as a result of its genesis, tends to concentrate on technocratic approaches to the construction of states rather than the politics of what is being constructed.22 For example, Hippler outlines a three-point plan for state building based on improving living conditions, structural reform of ministries and integration of the political system.23 Again, this is a depoliticised version of reality that appears feasible but takes the politics out of state building. In addition, such interventions are frequently carried out by bureaucrats or, in the case of security governance, by military officers from the international community whose concerns are primarily technical (ie teaching people to shoot straight) rather than political (ie teaching them who to shoot at and on whose orders).24

More importantly, if this means (as it usually does) integration of the political system into the international order, then who owns this process? Is it a process that has some form of local ownership among those who are supposed to benefit, or is it aimed at benefitting international states relying on a state system? Presumably all of this is done within a functioning security environment? Many critics of current approaches attribute policy coherence to ‘liberal’ approaches to international efforts that do not actually conform to real situations. There are two facets to this: first, there is a tendency to attribute far more coherence than actually exists and to construct a single philosophy of intervention that isn’t really there;25 second, there is a tendency to criticise elements of ‘liberal’ peace building (particularly those regarded as being forced) that are not really liberal.26 In this way, much criticism of liberal peace building cannot be truly valid when so many peace operations are not actually liberal.

While virtually all current analysts accept that there are problems with the nation-state in many of the contexts in which states are failing, there is still a tendency to accept the technocratic parameters of state building.27 This casts the nation-state as the norm in international relations, ignoring the broadening and deepening of security at international and subnational levels, particularly the intra-state nature of much conflict, international conflict actors and also the role of the state itself as an actor in non-state conflict. There remains an assumption that if we can develop the right mixture of policies then we can create a healthy nation-state which can exist
in the international order, while in reality many of the states where nation-building is focused are states only on paper. There are numerous reasons for this, but here I have grouped them into six sets of issues.

First, for a real state actually to exist requires the population to buy in to the idea of the state at some level, ie it must have legitimacy with its population as well as the international community. In a liberal state this is commonly taken as participation in the political management of the state through periodic democratic elections. However, this type of formal legitimacy may not be possible or even desirable for citizens, even given time to establish themselves in historically undemocratic systems. At the same time, a technocratic approach may have the effect of creating a state structure with no legitimacy with the general population, but which provides avenues to power for local elites (Timor-Leste) or replaces a colonial authoritarianism with a postcolonial authoritarian state (Zimbabwe).28

Second, the construction of a new state requires a significant cultural shift in terms of how people relate to the structures of authority, including the state as well as ‘traditional’ or ‘customary’ authorities that may regulate their everyday lives. Iraq is an example of where the approach of dismantling the state in its entirety led to an artificial state laid over subnational political systems, developing a state that exists on the basis of external aid rather than domestic support. The example of Afghanistan is even clearer. The emphasis on security governance that makes SSR part of state building has been lost in the drive to train and equip troops to fight the Taliban.29 Without integrating security into governance more broadly, external intervention risks creating just another armed faction seeking to retain power.

Third, state-building is extremely ‘capacity-hungry’ and there is a strong demand in conflict or post-conflict states for technical expertise in security services, especially train and equip programmes. These are relatively quick and easy to perform and they have easily quantifiable indicators, which makes them good programmes for donors. At the same time building up security forces without constructing strong and responsive oversight mechanisms is risky. However, experience shows that changing the governance culture of security takes time and is also very difficult.30

Fourth, there are critical questions of sustainability following most security interventions. Externally funded, and therefore externally driven, interventions can be extremely expensive and reflect the concerns of those external funders, even if local ownership is possible. They raise questions about the long-term sustainability of reform and security and also the relative balance between different activities. The example of the changing definitions of insecurity within Sierra Leone cited above shows that this balance needs to change over time to account for these shifts, but entrenched interests and the inflexibility of many donor planning systems effectively mean that states may be locked in to set trajectories for some time.

Fifth, state building is very uneven within states. Even where states have had a functioning core before, during or even after conflict, this core has rarely penetrated into the countryside.31 Many people simply do not receive or have never received services directly from states. In the area of justice...
provision, for example, around 80 per cent of the population in Sierra Leone and Rwanda receive justice from customary authorities like chiefs or village headmen, and this is accompanied by local security in the form of chieftain police, hunter militias or ‘vigilantes’. At best, this can produce a positive political hybrid where local people both have a say and also have a choice in terms of accessing services, including security, but also encompassing a variety of development approaches. However, there is a risk that political hybridity also reinforces the position of local elites and neo-patrimonial rule.

Last, there are inconsistencies between state building, security and development. There is an (unwritten) assumption that human security can best be served by creating a functioning state that will then provide security as a public good and that development will then provide benefits to the general population. However, human security in terms of ‘freedom from fear’ and citizen security in terms of an entitlement to protection by the state in which they are citizens, remains elusive for many people and the state’s (and by extension the international community’s) responsibility to protect citizens is yet to be realised in many places and may lead to claims of legitimisation of international intervention in failed states.

At the very least such arguments have certainly been used in terms of the forms of state building employed in poor countries, ranging from the reconstruction of Sierra Leone to creating a state in Sudan or the ‘armed state building’ of Iraq and Afghanistan. As stated above, this has led to a number of important developments in terms of peace building, not least the idea that a post-Westphalian international liberal peace requires non-liberal states to be liberalised in order for that peace to become sustainable. Consequently the chief aim of peace operations changes from creating negotiated solutions between states to actively contributing to the construction of liberal states, economies and social structures intended to spread liberal-democratic political structures. It is this idea that Mark Duffield claims lies behind the merger of security and development policy and the re-problematisation of security as both the result and precondition of development more broadly.

Clearly it is the transfer of the political architecture of the liberal state from Western liberal countries to non-liberal states in the form of state building that leads to a tension between the pacific nature of liberalism and the issue of whether those structures really are the political manifestation of the moral freedom of the local populations. At the same time there is a fundamental tension between the idea of local ownership of security and shared values underlying SSR. International donors are very keen to see states adopt transparency and accountability, but those constituting the governing elite of a state may not see it that way and the citizenry may prefer to be safe than to have more transparency.

At the same time as state building has become a core policy for many international actors, security has become central to the way in which Western governments deal with the developing world. In particular, the desire to propagate the ‘war on terror’ and to shore up ‘failed states’ has led Western
ideas of support to veer strongly towards enhancing developing countries to maintain their own security and to maintain regional security complexes that will hinder the activities of those who sit outside the formal state structure. State building and its cousin SSR have been co-opted into this activity.

**SSR and state building**

SSR as a concept has been closely related to state building. Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Sudan, among others, all have SSR programmes as an integral element of state building. The reconstruction and reform of security institutions following conflict has become a central element of international intervention where ‘relatively cheap investments in civilian security through police, judicial and rule of law reform . . . can greatly benefit long-term peacebuilding’.38 Despite the obvious difficulties with the political nature of these interventions, many international actors are currently involved in SSR programmes, including the UK, the UN, the US and the EU. These programmes employ an array of approaches and a complex mixture of international organisations, governments, non-state actors and private companies. While there are significant differences between the US approach in employing DynCorp to carry out ‘SSR’ in Liberia to the UN intervention in security and police reform in Timor Leste, there is a family resemblance in terms of the general approaches adopted that imply that SSR as a project accepts a set of core values that rest on shared ideas of what societies and states should be like. At the heart of SSR are the core values of democracy, good governance, gender equality, transparency and accountability, as well as a desire to propagate universal human rights. This not only brings SSR into direct conflict with some proposed local owners who may not want all of these things, it also represents a strong allegiance to the liberal peace-building project.

The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Handbook on SSR is generally accepted to be the core guideline on SSR internationally and contains most of the core definitions and philosophy of it. It provides an authoritative definition of SSR:

Security system reform is another term used to describe the transformation of the security system—which includes all the actors, their roles, responsibilities and actions—working together to manage and operate the system in a manner that is more consistent with democratic norms and sound principles of good governance and this contributes to a well-functioning security framework.39

The *Handbook* is a very clear statement on SSR. It puts forward the view that it should be focused on partner agreements with recipient countries with the aim of achieving four core objectives: the establishment of effective governance, oversight and accountability in the security system; the improved delivery of security and justice services; the development of local leadership and ownership of the process; and sustainability of justice and
security sector delivery. There is little disagreement among most donors regarding these aims, even if the balance may be different between them.\textsuperscript{40} Despite this, even a cursory glance at this definition will highlight a number of issues with the SSR process that represent continuing tensions. First, there is a real issue with labels and the meaning of words. Note that the acronym started by referring to security sector reform, but within the OECD this has come to mean security system reform as the concept broadened away from the ‘hard’ security of militaries towards the ‘soft’ security of the human security agenda. At the same time there have also been a number of debates surrounding the meanings of the other words involved. For example, the word ‘reform’ is frequently regarded as being too normative and is occasionally replaced by ‘transformation’.\textsuperscript{41} This is more than mere semantics. The debate over words represents a deeper debate over the scope and boundaries involved in this subject area.

In particular there has been a longstanding debate over what exactly constitutes the ‘security sector’ between narrow and broad definitions of SSR. The narrow definition focuses on the uniformed services and their oversight, specifically those services authorised to use force incorporating the military and usually (but not always) the police. Even within this definition there are issues about the inclusion or otherwise of the intelligence services and paramilitary forces, let alone the difficulties of including non-state actors and the issues of contested sovereignty and monopolies over force.

The broader approach to SSR incorporates non-uniformed services, the judiciary and essentially the entire justice and security system from private security companies and border guards through to the military, intelligence and civil governance mechanisms in the latter case to the traditional authorities, courts, and the judicial and penal systems in the former case. While this remains an ongoing debate, the consensus is currently in favour of the broader definition as represented by the OECD-DAC Handbook on SSR. This goes on to specify that the broad definition incorporates the core security actors of the state; the management and oversight bodies, incorporating civil society, legislative and political actors and associated institutions; the justice sector and the rule of law; and non-statutory security forces.

The broad approach does not clarify things or make the idea of SSR more coherent. The list of elements that can be included in any given SSR programme continually increases, while there is very little further clarity in terms of sequencing or prioritisation. At the same time, despite much discussion and debate surrounding SSR, most donors have failed to mainstream SSR work in their main programmes. In fact, successive financial crises and subsequent fiscal retrenchments within the public sector in the UK—the initial leader of SSR—have reduced SSR initiatives as a result of a reduction in cross-departmental budgeting between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Ministry of Defence (MOD) and DFID at a time when it is easier to protect internal budgets than external co-operation.\textsuperscript{42}

There has been a failure to create firm and coherent linkages between development and security agencies that has resulted in the lack of a co-ordinated approach in the field.\textsuperscript{43} The result of this is that SSR usually
consists of a rather mixed group of *ad hoc* policies and initiatives that do not lead to a co-ordinated approach to dealing with partner countries. The lack of a comprehensive strategy effectively means that SSR in practice too frequently consists of a series of small unco-ordinated programmes delivering ‘traditional’ development and security activities but renamed and rebadged as SSR. In the field, the DRC is an example where there is not only no comprehensive SSR plan, despite several donors espousing the aims of SSR, but also the different donors are carrying out activities that are different within the same sector and using the same SSR label.\(^{44}\)

This is particularly important in the context of where SSR programmes have taken place. Brzoska and Hanggi identify three main contexts for SSR interventions: a desire by donors to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of aid; improvement in civil–military relations and civil oversight; and, post-conflict reconstruction of failed states.\(^{45}\) In practice it is this third category that has dominated SSR thinking, but it is within this third category that Chanaa’s ‘conceptual–contextual divide’ is the greatest.\(^{46}\) As Chanaa has argued, there has been much thinking on what constitutes the security sector and the technocratic details of SSR, but far less emphasis on the contexts within which SSR is likely to be implemented. In a post-conflict environment the context is particularly important and the institutional environment in which SSR may take place is highly politically charged. This has led to some technocratic and prescriptive SSR efforts failing on a political level and potentially making fragile situations worse, or at best, not improving the security situation. What is required here in order to improve SSR programming is a far deeper understanding of the institutional context of any reform and the political repercussions of any such changes as well as the political will to change within a given context. This is therefore closely linked to the idea of constructing a state.

Apart from enhancing the security capabilities of many countries, SSR itself aims at a broader transformation of civil society and of civil–military relations. As a result of the rapid gains made by the human security agenda, SSR has been able to refocus the security aspects of reform away from national security strategies and state-led security measures and towards the individual as the referent object within security programming. Here then lies another key element in the security–development nexus. Both security and development agendas take the individual as the core element of their strategies and security becomes much more than protection from invading militaries; it becomes protection from domestic security threats, including the state, as well as criminal activities and also the right to a fair trial. In this way both the SSR and state building agendas aim not just to reconstruct security institutions but to remould social, political and economic structures.\(^{47}\)

The SSR literature itself is clearly aware that there are such challenges and that what amounts to social engineering is difficult on many different levels. However, what is clear is that the approaches to dealing with this issue do not involve re-examining the underlying assumptions of the model but designing newer technocratic solutions to problems—bigger budgets, more time, better planning and better technical knowledge of staff. Critically it also involves a
move to more measureable outcomes in an area where measurability is a real issue. These methodological approaches share a common belief that, with better implementation and knowledge, outcomes can be managed and, above all, predicted. As Ball and Hendrickson point out, this belief is unrealistically optimistic about those outcomes but also about the prospects for change within those countries most in need of SSR.⁴⁸

In addition, our collective knowledge about both state building and SSR in terms of causal relationships and real outcomes on the ground remains somewhat limited. In particular there is a dearth of knowledge about whether or not the international interventions surrounding security have had a long-term impact on peace within the partner countries, including the question of whether or not international intervention makes peace more likely or less so. In fact, there have been very few systematic analyses of SSR interventions that have looked beyond the immediate programme evaluations. Therefore many within this field have a tendency, as Etzioni suggests, to over-estimate the transformative abilities of powerful external actors acting on very different socio-political structures.⁴⁹

Contemporary policy makers are left with the dilemma of creating liberal states out of non-liberal ones and reconstructing linkages between security and development, hence the evolution of what has come to be called the ’security–development nexus’.⁵⁰ This sees states as being constructed around increasingly flexible approaches, usually within insecure environments. Putting SSR at the centre of state building has a number of implications for development policy, not least that it places an overarching emphasis on security within state building.⁵¹ Security remains important to the process of state building, however, since it is recognised to be a political entitlement of citizens as part of a social contract with the state. It is an obligation of the state to provide security for its citizens, not to protect personal regimes. In addition, it needs to be recognised that this will require substantial change on the part of security services including not becoming agents of insecurity themselves (as in Zimbabwe, for example). In addition, intervention needs to be rooted in the specific historical–cultural situation of the country and not just based on the international experience of donors. State building has become problematic partly because it does not take into account the specific contexts of its application, while the emphasis on multiparty elections as an indicator of the legitimacy of such states (or as an exit point for donors) is a mistake that may become dangerous, since it may worsen civil conflict or authoritarian threats to the population.⁵²

At the same time the emphasis on SSR also provides voice to those who are subject to violence. This is the logic of incorporating and providing support for access to justice for the victims of state and other forms of violence to include traditional authorities and chiefdom systems, which may be cheap and easily understood but which also traditionally discriminate against some groups at a local level. Not all local-level initiatives are positive or enjoy universal support.⁵³ SSR also recognises that the poor themselves see security as a critical issue facing them, however they define it. In addition, they tend to see security as a movable feast, with issues changing in differing contexts.
and over time. The state itself may also be seen as complicit in either directly making people more insecure through using security services or militias to oppress them, as in Zimbabwe, or in using violent organisations to enforce political power and patronage, as in Sudan, or using links between criminal gangs and state security organisations such as terrorist groups and the Pakistan secret services.

SSR and armed state building

The UK government has presented SSR in Sierra Leone as a ‘success’ in terms of security-led development and relies heavily on the validity of this experience as a means to justify expenditure on security-related programmes. The UK’s experience in Sierra Leone from the late 1990s through the war which ended in 2002, and which continues to date, provided a leader for the further development of SSR. Even though the early documents during Sierra Leone’s recovery do not refer to SSR, by the end of the war there is much discussion of it as being a way to unite the security and development aspects of the reform process, something that the then UK Development Minister, Clare Short, was willing to recognise. The UK, therefore, became a major donor implementing a very high-profile post-conflict intervention based on SSR. It developed this position further by providing funding and support for the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, by forming a Security Sector Advisory Team within Whitehall to advise on SSR, by establishing a Global Facilitation Network for Security Sector Reform and also by taking on the Chair of the OECD Working Group on SSR, which eventually produced the OECD-DAC guidelines on the subject.

In an interview in June 2008 Clare Short set out the position at the beginning of the intervention in Sierra Leone as follows:

The army is gone, we are trying to rebuild the state and it doesn’t have any armed forces, so that was the obvious role for the British, to help train the new Sierra Leonan army. By then, because Britain sort of accidentally had taken this straight forward position, there was a committee set up, chaired by Robin Cook [UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs 1997–2001], to say how do we do this Sierra Leone policy? But this was all done—believe what I am saying—it wasn’t planned in advance.

While the immediate Revolutionary United Front (RUF) threat to much of the country had dissipated by 2000 and disappeared by the achievement of formal peace in 2002, the country was faced with a number of security challenges, including unstable borders, the lack of an overall security infrastructure and discredited security institutions. The conflict had also led to rapid urbanisation and population displacement, with little prospect of economic betterment for large groups, particularly young men, many of whom needed to be demobilised. At the government level there was a powerful consensus for reconstruction of the country’s security system that incorporated political figures, senior operational leaders, civil society and external actors. The commitment and leadership of the UK as an external...
agent and the absence of many other international donors in Sierra Leone has meant that aid harmonisation has not been as problematic as it may have been with conflicting donor agendas. The intervention in Sierra Leone is detailed elsewhere, but essentially it has involved more than 10 years of sustained investment in and support of the security services and judiciary, encompassing programmes to demobilise the rebels and the remains of the army, reconstructing the intelligence and governance architecture, retraining and equipping the police and military, and supporting the justice sector.

The process in Sierra Leone has been a qualified success. Even though Sierra Leone remains near the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI), the conflict is over. The police and military function and justice is available at some level to most people. However, political and civil control over the above institutions remains weak. Indeed, there is a strong view that a key control mechanism over the security services remains the international staff, particularly the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT) within the army, as well as advisers in justice, intelligence and policing. Arguably SSR-led state building has led to the development of a competent security sector within a vacuum. As Ebo states, for SSR to be effective it needs to be part of a broader process of state transformation and Sierra Leone has failed to develop the broader transformative process that would have built a more comprehensive state. As Horn and Olanisakin state: ‘The UK government policy sees SSR as a fundamental prerequisite for the achievement of broader development goals, yet the evidence for Sierra Leone is that one does not necessarily lead to the other.’ The evidence suggests that, once development and security are placed so closely together in a post-conflict environment, there is an overarching emphasis on security rather than development and this creates problems further into the process.

This type of outcome is also clearly identifiable in Afghanistan, where immediate security demands have led to donors overriding the core principles of SSR. If Sierra Leone represents a DFID-led intervention that had poverty reduction at its core, the Afghan approach is as much dominated by donor rivalry as by poverty reduction. In particular, European and US views on the militarisation of the police and US disagreements over train and equip approaches and the protection of Afghan civilians as the main priority, have led to public disagreements related to exactly whose security the Afghan SSR process is developing. Whereas the SSR contribution to state building essentially relies on its contribution to governance, the approach in Afghanistan is far closer to regime security. Indeed, this also spread into police reform, which Perito describes as creating ‘little soldiers’ to fight the Taliban, rather than police officers answerable to an effective interior ministry.

Given that Afghanistan is likely to be seen as a test case for SSR, it represents a more extreme case than Sierra Leone in terms of the overriding importance of security in insecure environments. In other words, placing security and development together produces a form of SSR that emphasises hard security rather than governance. Consequently this has further effects on the state-building process and the construction of states that comprise well
trained and equipped security services with only minimal governance and a lack of complementary programmes to reduce poverty and other underlying causes of conflict. Both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan have had SSR processes that aimed to improve governance of security as a key element of state building. However, I wish to suggest that there are four core areas in which SSR has failed in both countries: leadership; ownership; sustainability; and what was excluded.

Leadership both by the donor community and by the recipient government is critically important. Without leadership donor elements can become incoherent and oppositional, as in Afghanistan. However, local leadership by President Kabbah in Sierra Leone, along with a cohort of senior civil servants, kept the reform moving for 10 years. The Sierra Leone experience shows that a determined group of leaders can keep reforms moving even when international staff are in and out of the country regularly on rotation. The risk of this approach is that, without surrounding governance structures, the creation of a powerful and influential ruling elite based on the security services may produce authoritarian rule, as the example of Zimbabwe shows.

Second, ownership of the process is critical to the establishment of a legitimate governance system and its absence may lead to the creation of an ‘empty-shell’ government or merely replace one form of authoritarian rule with another. Given the development of powerful elites around security services, one might expect a state-building exercise to incorporate security governance into the broader processes of governance. However, in practice, both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan have had issues in developing governance mechanisms around the security services, including interior ministry control over the police and judiciary, ministries of defence and parliamentary oversight. Without this development, the external donors exercise real oversight power in a manner of a pseudo-imperialist power.

In conjunction with point two, the other avenue of exercising ownership is the more broad ownership of civil society. There have been considerable efforts to engage civil society in developing national security plans, for example, but there are questions over who exercises control. In Sierra Leone the police and intelligence services have engaged civil society in a decentralised fashion, whereas the army sought to improve public perceptions. Initial evidence shows that this has worked in the sense that generally people no longer feel threatened by the security services, whereas before the transformation they certainly did. In Afghanistan police reform concentrated very much on training the police as counter-insurgency forces rather than as police, while the early accommodation with the Afghan National Police Auxiliary (ANPA) meant that the international community effectively recognised warlord militias, undermining attempts to establish transparent and accountable police services.

Third, there are significant issues about how long SSR programmes (and related state-building efforts) should last (durability) and who should pay for them in the long term (sustainability). The early period in Sierra Leone was characterised by the signing of a 10-year memorandum of understanding and
the strong commitment of a small number of senior politicians who felt that Sierra Leone could not be allowed to fall further into chaos. Because of this, there was strong pressure on UK ministries to work together on Sierra Leone. At the same time, they also recognised that this would take some time. However, this system has not been replicated in other environments, and there has been an under-appreciation of just how long SSR and state building may take. In Afghanistan the number of international actors militates against coherence, despite the presence of a dominant external actor—the US.

The issue of sustainability also leads to a clash between external actors and national owners of the process. It is inevitable that there will be differences between perceptions of what is or is not sustainable in the long run, as well as of what operational capability is required or feasible. Like much of SSR this is partly the result of questions of political balance and pragmatism and, at some level, of balancing realistic strategic planning with plans that amount to ‘wish lists’. There may be hard decisions to be made about the form and function of defence and policing infrastructures, vehicles and equipment that will need strong leadership at the top. However, there must also be commitment from external donors to retrain and reconfigure security institutions that are fit for purpose, as opposed to mirrors of security systems in the donor country. SSR interventions are expensive. Sedra notes that in 2004–05 the recurrent costs for the Afghan National Army alone were $171 million, roughly a quarter of the Afghan government’s entire budget and half of the country’s domestic revenue for the year—an illustration of expense but also of how important SSR is to state building more broadly. It is clear that Afghanistan does not have the economic capacity to sustain this effort without external support.

Lastly, it is important to consider what has been excluded from these developments. One of the most obvious issues is any form of economic development. Sierra Leone’s current situation is one where the population are undoubtedly better off than before or during the conflict, but the country remains near the bottom of the HDI. Afghanistan is now one of two countries actually below it within the HDI. Consequently there are real issues about whose security has actually been increased in broad terms, if most of the local population still suffer from insecurity as a result of economic conditions, rising crime and lack of access to basic services.

Above all, what the empirical evidence does not show is that SSR-led state building has led to the expected development benefits. At the same time, it may be that the links between security and development are more complex than currently thought and there may be a considerable time lag between the two.

Conclusion

State building that is led by SSR approaches in post-conflict environments seeks to construct states that are ‘capable’ in a liberal sense, ie providing good governance, democracy and security. In addition SSR interventions seek
to develop security systems that provide security both to the populations of those countries but also to the international community of states as a whole. Instead of being in a contractual relationship with multilateral donors, post-conflict or failed states find themselves involved with partnerships that involve blurring the national/international divide. The experience of both Sierra Leone and Afghanistan, among others, shows that the insertion of donor advisers into state institutions blurs accountability and can create states that are ‘empty shells’, or at least lack legitimacy with local populations. Such examples include Timor Leste and Kosovo, where Western officials exercise extensive control over not only state structures but also local politics. At the heart of this shift is a redefinition of state sovereignty from being an international absolute to a variable one based on state capacity or a state being sovereign only in so far as it is capable of carrying out certain functions. This question of sovereignty is again rarely raised in relation to SSR but it is beginning to find a voice through work on local ownership. However, the big questions here are who has legitimacy, ownership of what and can they actually exercise ownership? A sub-question is clearly whether or not donors are interested in local ownership and who benefits from the security produced by SSR?

However, it is also clear that some states that have been subject to SSR-led interventions (Sierra Leone, DRC), were more or less completely collapsed and were neither providing services to citizens nor functioning as states. The issue here is that many of the technical and downstream elements that follow on from interventions are very eloquently laid out but what is missing more generally in the SSR discourse is the upstream view, eg what are the normative assumptions of doing SSR? In particular, what kind of state is the international community trying to create, will an SSR intervention help or hinder that and who should own the process?

One narrative that needs to be interrogated here is the clear change in policy that followed the early 1990s involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo, where the cold war values of protecting the self-government of states were replaced by interventionism. Chandler posits the view that this encompassed a three-dimensional approach to sovereignty that encompassed, first, a capacity to protect; secondly, a duty rather than a freedom; and, third, using legal agreements to repackage external regulation by the international community as ‘partnership’. In SSR terms, this would translate as framing support for sovereignty by boosting capacity while simultaneously undermining self-government; legitimation of external regulation; and forming partnerships in which one side makes all of the decisions and holds the power.

This particular view may be just one perspective, but in SSR terms it does have implications in terms of accountability, in that reconceptualising sovereignty in this way allows international donors to mask their own responsibility for policy outcomes, evade accountability and camouflage invasive intervention as ‘empowerment and capacity building. However, critics of the liberal peace approach, and by implication the orthodox approach to SSR, concede that what is really required is a rebalancing of external regulation and internal voice that could lead to an effective state that is locally accountable. In other words,
criticising the liberal state and SSR should not lead to ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’. The current set of issues that we are discussing here relating to the future of SSR is an opportunity to move forward as well as an opportunity to criticise past or current practice.

This has broader implications for state building. In particular the contextual factors involved become critical to the success or otherwise of SSR and state building. Sierra Leone was a very specific example and it is by no means clear that the lessons learned in Sierra Leone are applicable in other places, let alone lessons learned in Iraq or Afghanistan. At the same time, increasing the contextual knowledge associated with SSR is not the whole story. There are still core issues related to the development and application of technocratic models that seek to bring about social engineering. In planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes as they stand there is an emphasis on linking inputs with outcomes based on an assumption that feeding inputs into machinery will produce particular outcomes. However, the failure to see the expected outcomes may not be down to insufficient information or poor implementation, but is more likely to be a result of the lack of neat linear relationships between input, causation and output. In this context what the example of Sierra Leone really shows the international community is not that the development of complex SSR models works as a means of linking development and security or that it can drive successful state building, but that success, in so far as it exists, is down to an ability on the ground to react to non-linear effects of intervention and a pragmatic political ability to steer a practicable course through competing polities.

Unfortunately this lesson does not seem to have been learned in more recent interventions. The prevalence of short-term security concerns in Afghanistan may be understandable but it is risky in the long term, whereas the ‘train and equip’ mentality appears to have spread to other SSR interventions, including in the DRC. The conclusion is therefore that the jury remains firmly out on SSR and its relationship to state building. However, the experience of Sierra Leone has been that once security and development are put together, security tends to dominate at the expense of longer-term development interventions. This is then exacerbated in the conflict environment of Afghanistan, where a joined up approach to state building with SSR at its core focuses almost entirely on security, leaving development trailing in its wake. The construction of a state focused on security and based on ideas of a liberal state that may not be relevant in such environments may also risk authoritarianism where that state lacks legitimacy and where it is centred on regime protection rather than on state building, in other words, when it is the sort of state that the UK and other donors are seeking to avoid rather than build.

Notes
7 See, for example, Jackson & Albrecht, Security Sector Transformation in Sierra Leone.
9 Lemay-Hébert, ‘The “empty-shell” approach’.
12 Jackson & Albrecht, Security Sector Transformation in Sierra Leone.
17 Lemay-Hébert, ‘The “empty-shell” approach’.
23 Hippler, Nation-Building.
24 See Jackson & Albrecht, Security Sector Transformation in Sierra Leone. See also A Mehler, ‘Hybrid regimes and oligopolies of violence in Africa: expectations on security provision “from below”’, in Fischer & Schmezle (eds), Building Peace in the Absence of States.
27 See Berger, From Nation-Building to State-Building.
30 Jackson & Albrecht, Security Sector Transformation in Sierra Leone.
33 This is not a new argument. It stems from work by Mancur Olsen on the difference between static and mobile bandits, the theory being that one wishes to be ruled by a static bandit since they have an interest in keeping you alive—basic feudalism. M Olsen, ‘Dictatorship, democracy, and development’, American Political Science Review, 87(3), 1993, pp 567–576. See also P Jackson, ‘Warlords as alternative forms of governance system’, Small Wars and Insurgencies, 14(2), 2003, pp 131–150; and A Mehler, ‘Hybrid regimes and oligopolies of violence in Africa’.
35 Bellamy & Williams, ‘Introduction’.
40 Brzoska & Hanggi, ‘Conceptualising security sector reform and reconstruction’.
41 As in Jackson & Albrecht, Transforming the Security Sector in Sierra Leone.
43 Jackson & Albrecht, Transforming the Security Sector in Sierra Leone.
44 For example, the French version of SSR consists of training and equipping, the Belgians are doing something similar, the EU is attempting to co-ordinate, the UK is doing something broader and is also involved with the police along with the South Africans. At the same time elsewhere on the continent the US version of SSR hires DynCorp to train the Liberian army without any contextual elements like civil command and control.
45 Brzoska & Hanggi, ‘Conceptualising security sector reform and reconstruction’.
50 Tschirgi et al, Security and Development.
51 L Luckham, ‘Introduction’, constructs an argument for rethinking security around four main points, which are also included here as part of the analysis. Luckham’s four points are: unequal distribution of security; recognition of agency; empirical evidence; and complicity of the state.
53 See Jackson, ‘Reshuffling an old deck of cards’.
55 Jackson & Albrecht, Transforming the Security Sector in Sierra Leone.
56 Denney, ‘Reducing poverty with teargas and batons’.
57 Clare Short, interview, June 2008, detailed in Jackson & Albrecht, Transforming the Security Sector in Sierra Leone.
58 While there were several active violent groups within Sierra Leone, the war had largely been perpetrated by the RUF under the leadership of Foday Sankoh, which was an associate of Liberia’s Charles Taylor, also active at this time just over the border.
61 In particular, the UK entered into a 10-year Memorandum of Understanding with Sierra Leone, which is an unusually lengthy stated commitment.
62 Jackson & Albrecht, Transforming the Security Sector in Sierra Leone.
63 While there were several active violent groups within Sierra Leone, the war had largely been perpetrated by the RUF under the leadership of Foday Sankoh, which was an associate of Liberia’s Charles Taylor, also active at this time just over the border.
Notes on contributor

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