SSR and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Armed Wing of State-Building?

Paul Jackson

1 Paul Jackson is Head of the School of Government and Society and Director of GFN-SSR at the University of Birmingham.
Introduction

This paper directly challenges some of the popular Security Sector Reform (SSR) mythology that has grown around the UK's involvement in Sierra Leone and the subsequent policy developments associated with SSR. It raises questions about the underlying political assumptions of the SSR process and contemporary SSR material, much of which lacks analysis of underlying theories of SSR relating to broader state-building and construction of a liberal peace.

Using a case taken from the reconstruction of Sierra Leone, this paper outlines some of the key issues emerging after ten years of reconstruction efforts. Sierra Leone is usually over-cited, but given its importance to any orthodoxy that may be said to exist, it is relevant here. Fundamentally, Sierra Leone remains a relatively small state in West Africa and the fact a viable state remains elusive, challenges assumptions about time taken in reconstructing socio-political norms and structures, and also questions state-building as a post-conflict approach.

This paper will argue that SSR in Sierra Leone was never a developed strategy but came to represent a series of policies that evolved on the ground largely as the result of the interaction of individuals and groups engaged in those early decisions, sometimes against the wishes of Whitehall, but always sharing a "direction of travel." This is an important point in terms of how SSR policy was actually developed and also how approaches come to be seen as being far smoother and well planned with hindsight, but also in terms of how policy-makers and academics can learn about social, governance and security processes.

Finally the paper moves on to analyse what lessons can and cannot be drawn from this experience and what the implications are for SSR going forward. It argues that the example of Sierra Leone as a "classic" post-conflict situation is enlightening but also damaging in the sense that any future SSR intervention will face radically different circumstances and needs to take into account broader issues of state-building and in particular recognising the deeply political aspects of what is being done when an international agency engages in SSR.

What is special about post-conflict states?

The study of post-conflict states is blessed with a wide and varied lexicon of terms that overlap, contradict and confuse whilst trying to describe varying forms of collapse. Whether fragile, weak, collapsed or neo-patrimonial, dysfunctional states all suffer from vulnerability to external shocks, internal conflict, competing economic and political structures and an inability to exercise effective legal control within its borders. A post-conflict state exhibits all of these features but in extreme circumstances. What post-conflict SSR implies is a context in which there has been a serious conflict and this has come to an end. The state may have completely collapsed along with security and there is a desire to reconstruct it.

Engaging in SSR in post-conflict environments poses special challenges but may also bring particular opportunities. Post-conflict states are usually characterised by weak or non-existent states, fragile political situations that may continue to be violent, and an economic situation that is, at best, precarious. For a policymaker, a 'blank slate' is attractive for reconstruction and for SSR and yet it is dangerous and illusory in leading
donors to ignore existing norms and structures and promoting ignorance of previous history. This, in turn, may lead to a ‘one size fits all’ approach that can dangerously undermine long term sustainability. At the same time, the post-conflict moment does create a window of opportunity for reform that also provides a series of entry points. There is usually a local will to accept all forms of external support, even in sensitive areas like security, which may be lacking in countries not experiencing state collapse. This may, however, be complicated when the environment is not actually “post-conflict” at all as in Afghanistan and Iraq and where SSR is taking place under combat conditions.

It is often cited that the main difference between post-conflict SSR and “normal” SSR is that the post-conflict version needs to deal with the legacy of past conflict. However, this could be true of any post-authoritarian state, however this is defined. Rather, the main distinguishing features of post-conflict environments are usually the need to provide immediate security; the need to demobilize and reintegrate combatants; and the need to downsize security actors.

Overall, the chief characteristic of post-conflict SSR is usually the level of influence of external actors in the process, including agencies, international militaries, private companies and non-statutory security actors, including insurgent groups, religious transnational actors and warlords. This is why post-conflict SSR is so bound up with the broader process of state-building. If security is one of the core functions of a state then we, as SSR practitioners, need to engage with what this general process means for what we are doing. I try to outline some of this in the following section.

SSR and state-building

As implied above, 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.” A comprehensive discussion of the liberal peace is beyond the scope of this paper, but is basically very simple. 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 of these elements surround the core principle of individual freedom.

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. 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

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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 pacific nature of liberalism and the issue of whether those 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 peacebuilding, 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 collapsed entirely. There are 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 on functioning states to carry out basic tasks. The current international security environment also relies on states to maintain existing international order, thus the development of functioning security sectors within those states comes to the forefront of this agenda, something that is rarely mentioned in SSR literature.

Unsurprisingly state-building has become a focus of much international aid, but unfortunately these attempts at realizing its goals in practice have frequently been problematic. A core reason for this is the methodology of state-building. The vast majority of states that have been subject to these approaches have concentrated very much on technical issues – effectiveness, functionality – rather than on the idea of what a state actually is. A real issue in Africa and Central Asia in particular is what constitutes a state? There is a clear difference between constructing a state apparatus and building a real world state, not least in separating the technical process of what states do, from the political processes involved in what states actually are.

In Iraq the US attempted to construct a western style state armed with a whole range of neo-liberal state theories that view the institutions of the state as almost being separated 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. 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 issues with 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 much literature on state-building, but it is useful to look at representative illustrations of core approaches\(^5\). Francis Fukuyama outlines a set of approaches posited on a completely ahistorical and technocratic view of states.\(^6\) One of the initial points made by Fukuyama in his analysis concerns the lack of institutional memory within policy bodies such as the UN concerning state-building. This is complemented by the point that state-building takes a long time – it is a long-term commitment and requires sustained investment in time and resources.

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\(^5\) See Mark T Berger (2007) *From Nation-Building to State-Building*, Routledge, for a very good discussion of these issues.

Other analysts add to these ideas but many of these generalised comments do not really provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for state-building. Hippler outlines a three-point plan for state-building based on:

1) Improvement in living conditions.
2) Structural reform of functional ministries.
3) Integration of the political system.

Well, yes, but what does this actually mean in practice and integration of the political system into what? More importantly, if this means (as it usually does) integration of the political system into the international order, then who owns this process? Is this then a process that has some form of local ownership amongst those who are supposed to benefit, or aimed at benefitting international states relying on a state system? Presumably, all of this is done within a functioning security environment, a feature curiously missing from Hippler's analysis.

Whilst 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 as laid out by Fukuyama. 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 that can exist in the international order, whilst in reality many of the states where nation-building is focussed are states only on paper.

Rebuilding states on paper does not mean that they exist in reality. Fundamentally all states rely on people to make them work and this means that states need to be political structures as well as institutional bodies. The implications of this begin with people needing to buy in to the state at some level. Commonly related to ideas of legitimacy, there has to be some level of support for the state as an institution that represents something that they recognise as a state. In a liberal sense, this is represented by multiparty democracy, but in reality this type of democratic structure may not deliver representation in this environment, partly because nascent democratic institutions take time to bed down. 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 the nation-state.

This raises the second main point, namely that the construction of a new state requires a significant cultural change in terms of how people relate to that state as well as how people conduct everyday business. In Iraq, for example, current attempts of the US to construct a western state, and its initial emphasis on deconstructing Saddam’s state and political party, have effectively created an artificial layer of a state overlying subnational political systems. That state exists solely because the US supports it, not because there is an underlying support for it within Iraqi society. This creates the risk that the new Iraqi

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8 Wolfgang Heinrich and Manfred Kulessa, ‘Deconstruction of States as an Opportunity for New Statism: The example of Somalia and Somaliland’ in Hippler (ed) Nation-Building, 2005
9 Similar comments could also be made of Afghanistan.
state effectively becomes another faction rather than an oversight mechanism for controlling warring factions at subnational level.

Thirdly, state-building is extremely uneven within states. A core feature of the security system of Sierra Leone is that the UK provided a lot of technical support for the security institutions without the corresponding political support – mainly because it is difficult. Ten years of reform have effectively created an overdeveloped security force, including intelligence, but without the culture of civil oversight to control it.

Fourthly, given the fact that state-building is so resource intensive, it is also externally funded. This, in turn means that, on a political level, the process is externally driven. This creates significant problems with regard to funding and funding priorities, particularly when considering local ownership – or lack of it – and the availability of funding affected by the financial crisis. It also raises serious questions about long term sustainability of reform and security.

The development of SSR as a concept has been closely intertwined with the growth of state-building as a set of activities that coalesced following the collapse of arrange of states in the post-Cold War era due to conflict. The processes involved in improving the capabilities of civil servants providing oversight in a Ministry of Defence cannot realistically be divorced from the development of civil service reform programmes as a whole, and security in general remains central to the entire state-building approach, both from the point of view of individual citizens and also the international community, however that may be defined. Furthermore, SSR is an integral part of the international community’s approach to conflict management. 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.”

SSR seeks to improve the performance and accountability of police, military and intelligence organisations with the aim of improving the basic elements of security for the individual. SSR moves far beyond narrow technical definitions of security institutions and follows a more ambitious agenda of reconstructing or strengthening a state’s ability to govern the security sector in a way that serves the population as a whole rather than the narrow political elite. This involves a radical restructuring of values and cultures within usually secretive and insular institutions. The process usually takes place in contexts where the general population is mistrustful of security services and frequently hostile to organisations that may have been viewed as a direct threat to their own individual security. SSR is therefore an extremely ambitious set of approaches that cut to the very core of the functions of the state in relation to its citizens.

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. Whilst 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 East Timor, there is a family resemblance in terms of the general approaches adopted.

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There has been much written about SSR but as mentioned above, it has been subject to what Peake, Scheye and Hills refer to as “benign analytical neglect.”¹¹ This neglect has emerged despite the concept having been developed partly from an academic pre-history of civil-military relations. Whilst there has been a lot of writing on SSR it has tended to be focussed on practical policy-related analysis rather than being rooted in conceptual or theoretical approaches.¹² As a result much of the work on SSR has been very specific and focussed on particular activities rather than looking at broader interventions as an expression of, and in relation to broader social and economic reform.¹³ In particular, specifics of case studies have been used as gateways into discussions surrounding security without really reflecting on broader implications.

**Sierra Leone as an example of policy development in the field**

Sierra Leone is one of the most cited examples of successful SSR programming, particularly in the context of post-conflict interventions. Given this, the actual experience of Sierra Leone has been dominated by a popular mythology of what happened based on specific examples of intervention rather than an overview of what actually happened.

Whilst 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 stable commitment of the UK in particular as an external agent has meant that aid harmonisation has not been as problematic as it may have been with conflicting donor agendas.

The UK intervention itself can be divided into three main periods. The initial period, from 1997 to 2002, was characterised by the challenge of beginning a reform process in a conflict environment, subsiding into a ceasefire and then quickly reverting back to conflict. Events in this period were dominated by the overriding context of open conflict. The general state of emergency surrounding Sierra Leone at the time left no space for sitting back and developing a strategy and the country was in urgent need of support. Thus, programmes started in collaboration between the UK and the Government of Sierra Leone in the late 1990s were shaped as responses to consecutive crises prior to 2002, when the war, and the accompanying disarmament and demobilization, was declared over. The lack of any capacity to oversee the armed forces, properly coordinate responses to security threats or collect coherent intelligence became the focus of the intervention through an overarching programme known as the Sierra Leone Security Sector Project (SILSEP).

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¹³ See Hanggi and Bryden (eds) Security Governance.
The Government itself had been subject to two coups since 1992 and not only did the armed forces have only limited capability but security institutions were incapable of gathering meaningful intelligence on meaningful threats since their degradation as largely political institutions used to suppress opposition and basically to gather street gossip without any form of information processing. In fact intelligence, through the Office of National Security (ONS) became one of the main vehicles for extending state power into the countryside through a decentralised security system that involved local people. Of course, the use of international aid money through DFID to construct an intelligence system remains somewhat contentious.

The basic approach of these early interventions reflected the basic needs of the security services, but also the political needs of the Sierra Leone Government at that time. Police primacy, for example, had been a key priority of President Kabbah from early on, at least from 1996, and the process of establishing a police force had thus been given priority. The police were given a new ethos, Local Needs Policing, which encompassed approaches to gender-based violence through the creation of Family Support Units. It also included the purchase of vehicles, communication equipment and uniforms and, finally, support to the judiciary through the Law Development Programme.

The second period, from 2002 to 2005, was largely concerned with consolidating early gains and spreading reform beyond Freetown. Officially the conflict ended in January 2002 although there were significant areas of the countryside where conflict was ongoing and certainly areas that were not under the direct control of the government. The first post-war presidential and parliamentary elections were held and the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP) won by a significant margin. This was very much President Kabbah’s triumph; he was seen as the man who brought peace to Sierra Leone after a decade of war. The elections were made possible with the deployment of what was the biggest UN peacekeeping mission at the time (17,000 foreign troops). However, while the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) provided transport and other logistic support, the actual policing of the election process, in the main peaceful, was undertaken exclusively by the Sierra Leone Police.

Immediately after the election, the agencies and programmes that had helped win the war were instantly faced with a different set of challenges from the emergency planning they had been engaged before. These included considerable inter-ministerial and agency rivalry, the balance of the UK military between operational command and advisory roles, continued political instability. Above all, the Government had to contend with a very fragile peace exacerbated by the large numbers of armed former combatants, a non-functioning military and a partly-developed police force.

A key development was the creation of a security strategy that linked security with more general development. The Interim Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper of July 2001 and the later full process (2005-2007) were supplemented by a security sector review, using the now functioning ONS and their extensive local links. This reflected a new approach to security threats and was integral to the policy of establishing domestic police primacy, promoting good governance, peace and security. This took the definition of security to a new level, reflecting a far broader definition of security incorporating poverty, governance and economic development. In particular, this review provided much needed conceptual clarity on security sector institutions, clarified the role of the ONS as being well placed to incorporate security and development and also aligned security and development to a degree not seen before in Sierra Leone.
The final period was a period of consolidation and development that culminated in the general elections of 2007 and encompassed a spreading of SSR activity beyond the reconstruction of security services and into a wider approach to the governance of the security and justice system. In programmatic terms the UK broadened its support to the justice sector as a whole, rather than to the police more narrowly, by creating a Justice Sector Development Programme. Prior to this, little UK assistance had been given to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and prison services in particular.

The Government also grappled with questions regarding the future direction of security system transformation in Sierra Leone, particularly the sustainability of the military. The issue of force levels and capability was particularly important, since the security sector review had identified the country’s critical security threats as internally-generated, not as external threats. By 2007 the UK was seriously considering its commitment to SSR through its planning process, effectively putting many of the early gains made by security institutions in some degree of peril since the transformation had not effectively encompassed the broader issues of civilian, particularly political, control over security institutions, and in some ways remained only part-finished. Indeed the recent evaluation of Sierra Leone country programmes identifies sustainability of the RSLAF, shifting the emphasis of security sector policy to the principle threats of poverty, poor services and unemployment.

As such, the SSR process in Sierra Leone has been a qualified success. Successful because even though Sierra Leone remains bottom of the Human Development Index, the conflict is over and the population are relatively safe from violence. The police and military function and justice is available at some level to most people. However, this must be qualified because after all of this technical assistance to the institutions, the politics of civil control over those institutions remains weak. In fact, 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. This must question the sustainability of SSR, but also raise questions about the feasibility of undertaking SSR as a general policy, given the relatively small size of Sierra Leone14.

What possible lessons could be drawn from this experience?

There are a number of core themes that have recurred over time and have importance for both the development of Sierra Leone itself, but also for the development of SSR more generally. This list does not claim to be exhaustive, but represents some of the conclusions drawn from recent research.15

1. National ownership and engagement is critical. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of local ownership. Experience shows that it was the Sierra Leonean team that provided the continuity, with only a few external advisers remaining in country for substantial periods of time. Consistent political leadership and support was also present to drive through reforms. Good, capable and committed senior

14 I would not want this view to disparage some of the excellent work that is being done in this area, and that was carried out in Sierra Leone. However, the UK Government committed large amounts of money and other resources to Sierra Leone – small country of around 5m people - over a ten year period and SSR remains unfinished. This has implications for larger, more complex countries undergoing security reforms.

staff have been critical. It is incorrect to say that the whole process has been externally driven, even if elements have clearly been so and the question remains one of balance between local and external control.

2. The danger in maintaining a strong core group of leaders of the process is that once the support mechanisms are removed, then this group becomes extremely powerful. In addition, its removal removes much of the institutional memory of the reform process itself. This is a particular concern in a young democracy with few consolidated checks and balances. In practice, however, there may not be many alternatives to a core team.

3. Engaging civil society is valuable and was operationalised in various ways 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 from Sierra Leone shows that this has worked in the sense that generally people no longer feel threatened by security services, whereas before the transformation they certainly were.

4. By far the least developed element of oversight within is at the political, including parliamentary, level. Due to issues with and between Ministries and Ministers and the lack of functioning parliamentary structures, one of the key oversight mechanisms within the Government is the Office of National Security (ONS). The question remains, however: who monitors the ONS? In the longer term, the issue of ONS oversight may become politically risky. Without proper parliamentary oversight and UK support, the security system may be hindered from developing into a truly democratically-led set of institutions.

5. Individuals have played an important role in developing SSR in Sierra Leone. This is at least in part a reaction to the lack of a coherent UK Government strategy, which drove a series of disagreements on the ground among UK officials. It is easy in hindsight to trace smooth policy developments, but, briefly much of the policy direction was enabled by the creation of joint funding pools in Whitehall and decision making of individuals on the ground who were empowered to take professional decisions and who needed to act relatively quickly. There was no overarching SSR strategy at the beginning, just a desire to reconstitute a state and security for the population.

6. Another significant aspect of UK collaboration was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1997, a long-term agreement between the two countries scheduled to last until 2012. Because UK engagement was primarily the result of a coalition of high-level British politicians who were committed to a country they felt could not be allowed to fall further into chaos, there was strong pressure on UK Ministries to work together on Sierra Leone. It should also be emphasised how atypical this is just in UK approaches alone, let alone in the whole donor community.

7. 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 what operational capability is required or feasible. Like much of SSR this is due in part to 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.

Sierra Leone’s current situation is one where the population are undoubtedly better off before or during the conflict, but the country remains at the bottom of the Human Development Index. Consequently, there are real issues about whose security has actually been secured 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. The UN and UK intervened over a long period of time and ten years of sustained investment and work have still left some aspects of SSR unfinished, particularly aspects of democratic accountability and civil oversight. I would argue that a core lesson to take from Sierra Leone is that a three- or five-year project cycle is not enough to change a political culture, certainly without other changes, such as the economy, remaining relatively static.

One of the remarkable features of the UK’s intervention in Sierra Leone is how atypical it is. Effectively three Ministers got together and decided that this one country could not fall. They then crafted a MoU for ten years effectively providing not only a security guarantee but also a commitment to rebuild a state more or less from scratch. In fact, as DFID’s own Evaluation Report of September 2008 points out, this MoU remained the only official document setting out DFID’s strategic intentions between 2002 and 2007.\footnote{Poate, D. Balogun, P. Rothmann, I., Knight, M. and Sesay, F. Evaluation of DFID Country Programmes: Sierra Leone, Evaluation Report EV690, DFID, 2008. It does point out that there are two informal documents that have informed strategic choices: the draft country strategy paper of 2002, and the Joint EC/DFID Country Strategy for Sierra Leone, drafted in 2006 but approved in January 2008.}

The threat of returning to some form of violent conflict remains, particularly in the countryside. In urban areas, public concern about street crime underscores the need to address the issue of youth unemployment. As in many countries, Sierra Leone is experiencing the issue of unemployed young men becoming the “foot soldiers” of an increasing number of criminal gangs, particularly in the drug trade, and increasing the incidence of street crime. Given the weakness of Sierra Leone following the war, the development of gangs happened relatively rapidly and whilst security has improved, there is no way in which the total security system transformation process could be said to have been “completed,” even after ten years.

The importance of the justice sector remains an outstanding issue in Sierra Leone. It is clear that for most people in Sierra Leone justice is local; it involves a wide range of non-formal and semi-formal conflict-resolution mechanisms, including village elders, religious figures and chiefs. However, reports from across Sierra Leone suggest that some of these mechanisms result in controversial land allocations, an extremely sensitive issue that was one of the social causes of the war. This is likely to remain an issue as long as the chiefs elected for life by a limited suffrage, stand as custodians of the land. Justice reforms need to pay more attention to non-formal justice mechanisms, whilst at the same time encouraging an accessible legal system and rebalancing state-building and SSR.

**Conclusion: External peacebuilding and the construction of agendas**

In some ways, the experience of Sierra Leone represents the orthodox approach to SSR. However, in reality once the empirical evidence is analysed much of the contemporary orthodoxy of SSR begins to look more like a constructed mythology rather than a coherent theory. Moreover much of the theoretical work that has taken place in the field, although
frequently excellent, has begun by providing a definition of SSR (typically including references to: DDR; affordable and effective security bodies; and effective oversight mechanisms consistent with democratic norms) and then moves on to look at the how question. Typical is Hanggi’s approach in his introduction to conceptualising SSR where he states that, “SSR is essentially aimed at the efficient and effective provision of state and human security within a framework of democratic governance.”

Many of the technical and downstream elements that follow on from this statement are very eloquently laid out but what is missing more generally in the SSR discourse is the upstream view, i.e. what does it mean to say ‘democratic governance’? This is critical to the analysis of SSR and particularly in post-conflict states where peace may be fragile and where the reconstitution of a state is problematic. An absence of what this really means represents a view of intervention as being technical and therefore void of political implications. This has an impact overall in terms of the introduction of particular types of states, but also in terms of how individuals relate to the security architecture on the ground.

An issue here is that post-conflict environments are exaggerations of failed states in that they exhibit similar characteristics but they are even less constrained by institutional frameworks. This also means that post-conflict states are even less able to oppose any forms of external interventions due to weak bargaining positions. 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 that is starting to have an impact. 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 needs the security produced by SSR?

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 firstly a capacity to protect; secondly, a duty rather than a freedom; and thirdly, 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 whilst 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. What I mean by this is 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.

So far so good, but even 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

17 Hanggi and Bryden, Security Governance
opportunity to criticise past or current practice. However, this may require a number of key things to happen.

Firstly, policymakers and academics have to take a broader approach to the nature of conflict and particularly SSR. It is inadequate to stick to the same technical descriptions of SSR and confine the discussion of “politics” to obstacles to achieving technical aims. This debate needs to be widened out to encompass the politics of what it means to carry out SSR and, by extension, what it means to construct a liberal state.

Secondly, there also needs to be a refocusing of analysis away from the primacy of external solutions to internal problems towards acknowledging external causes and internally generated solutions to local problems. This may also be linked to who is actually used on the ground to work with local actors. I would argue that the initial lack of a grand strategy and the lack of clear guidance from Whitehall was beneficial to the early intervention in Sierra Leone. The absence of ‘planning blight’ usually produced by the UK’s DFID meant that people on the ground were empowered to take decisions without completing endless internal forms or logical frameworks. Decisions could be made and implemented quickly with local counterparts. Of course, this could be dangerous, but whether by luck or design, this form of evolutionary approach was enabled by putting people on the ground who actually understood the local situation and also their technical field. This is a very strong lesson from Sierra Leone – interventions require people who know and understand what they are doing, not who happen to be available. This is clearly something that the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan can learn from.

Thirdly, this also means that SSR must be more bound up with local definitions of security, as opposed to just taking universal definitions of human security that are linked to western ideas of what security actually is. This implies much more recognition of subjective, local definitions of security, but also raises the danger of just relying on “traditional” justice systems. Traditional systems may be accessible, easily understood and present, but there are three core problems with just taking existing justice and security systems as being effective: firstly, in a post-conflict situation there is a good case for arguing that they cannot have been that effective if they contributed to the war in the first place; secondly, there are legitimacy issues related to exactly how “traditional” some of the actually systems are; and, thirdly, under traditional systems some parts of society may have been systematically excluded, usually women and young people. This is not the place to have a complete discussion about traditional systems, but a post-conflict environment must take into account the reconstruction of local security networks without replicating systematic problems that contributed to conflict in the first place.

Lastly, a critical concern of any involvement in state-building or post-conflict SSR has to be based on a thorough understanding of the relations of power and forms of violence. Any reform programme needs to understand the specifics of violence and to focus on history, anthropology and politics of violence in order to reconstruct meaningful security. Currently too much of the focus is on technical models, both in academic terms through discussions of “elegant” mathematical modelling and in policy terms through technical solutions to constructing security institutions based on unwritten political assumptions. What this means is that there is a gulf between aspirations and actuality that is particularly wide in a post-conflict environment and which can only be addressed when the politics of what we are doing are recognised.