Governance of the Security Sector in SADC

The Southern African region faces the major challenge of combining the principles of democracy and the creation of democratic institutions with the pragmatic decisions required to implement reforms in the security sectors of SADC member countries. This is rendered especially difficult by the need to address security issues in the different country contexts. There are also conceptual barriers to be overcome, because there is no consensus among African leaders as to what ‘security’ denotes, for example whether it refers to regime or human security.

There is also an urgent need to expand definitions of security threats to include technological risks such as cyber warfare. While the seriousness of cyber threats is a source of great concern in the global community, African governments have not engaged with this issue so far.

The field of security sector reform (SSR) is a particularly sensitive one for the governments of the Southern African region, and indeed for those in the rest of Africa. The difficulty of analysing SSR (as with ‘security’ in general) begins at the conceptual level, especially when it comes to questions of terminology. Expressions such as ‘security sector governance’ and ‘security sector reform’ tend to be regarded with a certain amount of caution and apprehension by governments, depending on the perceptions of the users. It appears that a number of African governments prefer the term ‘governance’ to ‘reform’, possibly because their leaders interpret reform as implying a radical and revolutionary
change-over in the security sector.

To fully interrogate the concept of SSR, a major colloquium was organised by the African Public Policy and Research Institute (APRI) and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) in Johannesburg in June 2011. The colloquium brought together 59 participants from across southern Africa from parliamentary oversight committees, civil society organisations, academic institutions, senior echelons of government and the diplomatic and donor communities.

The full report of the colloquium can be downloaded below.

During the thought-provoking colloquium, some participants argued that the concept itself was foreign, and that by adopting it Africans were attempting to mimic what was happening in the western world. Their reasoning was that Africans needed to coin their own phrase to describe the process, so that it reflects and accommodates African situations. They also suggested that not only should the name be changed, but that the process it denotes required alteration as well. Africa needs to domesticate SSR in both terminology and practice so that it not only addresses African situations but provides a means of adjusting to new developments in the range of security threats.

Recognizing the importance of SSR in Africa’s emerging democracies, the African Union (AU) has begun to formulate a SSR framework. It has declared itself available and ready to assist African states to conduct SSR, as there is evidence that individual countries have found it difficult to implement SSR on their own. The framework envisaged is based on the understanding that SSR is important to democratic consolidation in Africa, and that, if implemented effectively; it can play an important role in preventing the occurrence, or mitigating the continuation of, conflicts in African countries. Once the framework has gone through all the relevant structures of the AU and has been approved, regional organizations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and individual member states can use it to guide their SSR arrangements.

Implementation of SSR is likely to be a daunting task for the governments of the region. Because of the uneven nature of democratization in different SADC countries, some of them have enormous democratic deficits. In these states, SSR will be very difficult to accomplish, because this kind of reform is premised on an operational democratic dispensation. This is underscored by the example of the SSR experience of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Among the challenges faced by the DRC, in common with other SADC states, is the fact that some of their SSR programmes are donor-driven, because African countries lack the requisite resources for conducting genuine SSR independently. This means that many of these programmes tend to be aligned with the interests of the donors, in line with the adage ‘he who pays the piper calls the tune’. SADC member states recognise the need to make the SSR process home-grown, and thus a better reflection of the realities of their security environments. Another difficulty is raised by the need for a regional approach to SSR because of the cross-border nature of some African conflicts, again exemplified by the situation in the DRC. An uneven undertaking of SSR processes across the region can undermine the good progress achieved in some states.

A particularly thorny issue in some SADC countries that have recently seen the end of conflict revolves around what provision is made for war veterans, who can pose a significant threat to democratic transition and consolidation. Although the extent of the threat differs from country to country, we have the instance of Zimbabwe, where the war veterans have emerged as a critical political influence, especially in perpetrating election-related violence, and engaging in intimidation to entrench the political interests of some groups or organizations. On the other hand, war veterans have not posed a similar security problem in Ghana and Kenya.

However, the discussions that took place at the conference made it clear that in most African countries the economic reintegration of war veterans remains a major concern, because a failure of assimilation could result in their involvement in violent political processes. Accordingly, the issue of war veterans needs to be integrated into discourse on SSR. War veterans are a phenomenon that has not been the subject of much research or discussion in Southern Africa so far. Study of this issue should prioritise factors such as demobilization, economic reintegration, their
assimilation into political party structures, and their use to influence or subvert electoral outcomes.

The governance of the security sector in countries such as Ghana and Kenya demonstrate a much more developed democratic governance structure than in Southern Africa, which presents a more problematic scenario. In general SSR as practised in the region is not grounded on democratic institutions and practices, but revolves around the leaders, who maintain strong control over the security sector. This has intensified the politicization of security.

It is a source of even greater concern when the governance structures allow, or are manipulated into, utilizing war veterans as a ‘fifth column’ that subverts democratic processes. The spectre of the security sector operating as a political instrument in pursuit of regime security continues to loom large in Southern Africa.

Parliaments in most Southern African countries are not able to play a genuine role in overseeing the affairs of the security sector. While defence portfolio committees exist in all the countries, in the majority of cases they tend to treat defence issues tabled before them as a mere formality, rather than requiring rigorous oversight.

The reason is that in most SADC countries parliamentarians do not debate critical issues such as defence budgets because doing so is considered as tantamount to questioning the legitimacy of the head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. As a result, security sector expenditure is a major contributor to the fiscal crises that confront Southern African states from time to time. Another reason for the lack of parliamentary oversight is that in general members of parliament in SADC countries are ill-equipped to undertake constructive and meaningful roles in monitoring executive decisions.

The creation of a regional network of parliamentarians would therefore go a long way towards addressing this lack of capacity by fostering continual interchanges of ideas, opinions and information. This would lead to a cross-pollination of expertise, and provide the necessary skills and experience to enable parliamentarians to exercise their oversight functions more fully.

**Key Recommendations from the colloquium**

First, in order for the states of the SADC region to undertake a meaningful SSR process and for their parliaments to exercise genuine oversight of developments in the security sector, they need to consolidate their democracies in a people-centered manner. This would improve the quality of life of the general populace. Very little progress can be made without this prerequisite, difficult though it may be to accomplish.

Second, SADC states should prioritize the issue of SSR in order to support democratic gains. The continent has experienced serious civil uprisings deriving from contestation of election results in many countries, even when these elections have been democratic. In Southern Africa, the case of Zimbabwe springs to mind, but even in other states in the region tensions between political parties create simmering resentments and mistrust that can all too easily erupt into violence. Central to the support of election results in a country is the involvement of the security sector. In the past, arguably even in the present, this sector has been manipulated to serve the political interests of certain individuals and political groupings rather than the common good. It follows that unless SADC states implement comprehensive and meaningful SSR, political stability will be difficult to achieve and maintain.

Third, before meaningful security sector reform can be conducted, some of the SADC countries need to conduct a process of national reconciliation. In the majority of these countries relations between individuals and political groupings have been fractured so seriously that repairing them has become a national necessity. These nations, such as Zimbabwe, should undertake a national ‘healing process’ to prepare a foundation for SSR. This process should not be aimed at revenge or punitive measures, but should be seen as an attempt to ‘level the ground’ before the building blocks for SSR can be laid. Only then can a meaningful SSR process be instituted to bring about peace and stability in the future.
Fourth, there is a need for SADC and its member states to embrace the SSR framework that is being developed by the AU. This is very important, because it will afford them the means and the support required to undertake SSR, especially since the AU has made itself available to assist whenever it is requested to do so. This is essential, because experience has shown that if states are to carry out SSR in a meaningful way, they cannot do it alone. The objectivity of external assessment and guidance is needed, as is assistance in addressing questions of transparency. There are also the more practical aspects that are difficult for a state to manage unaided, chief among them the problem of sufficient resources to carry out the necessary reforms.

Fifth, Southern African parliaments should take their oversight responsibilities seriously, to serve the interests of the electorate. This is especially the case where the security sector is concerned. During the conference, delegates expressed the concern that parliamentarians do not exercise diligent oversight of defense issues, even when they are members of defence portfolio committees. At present, such committees are mere ‘talk shows’ intended to allay the concerns of citizens and the international community, but in practice achieving little. There is, therefore, an urgent need for parliamentarians to do their work, and without fear or favour.

Sixth, while there are often structural problems that prevent parliamentarians in Southern Africa from exercising oversight, there is also the serious challenge of their lacking the capacity to do so. Few MPs know what is expected of a monitoring role, and are lacking in the kinds of information and experience required to address the issues they are expected to scrutinize. It is important to assist MPs to develop these necessary skills through various means, including workshops and modules on democratic practice, and the principles oversight committees should be following. At present, the only training provided to MPs is a minimal introductory course offered when a new term of parliament begins. Its content is largely focused on familiarization with the operation of parliament, and does not address issues of oversight.

Seventh, it would be very useful if a network for SADC parliamentarians was created and maintained by a service provider who would undertake responsibility for running the network on a continuous basis. The service provider would have to build a database of all security sector portfolio committees in the region, and identify areas in which intervention is needed to elicit better performance. The managers of the network would also be responsible for organizing annual workshops for MPs that would allow them to share information and experiences. This would contribute to a cross-fertilization of ideas that would almost certainly improve the performance of MPs involved in oversight of the security sector.

Eighth, progress and growth are best served when founded on knowledge. It is imperative to found an organization or institute to generate knowledge on developments in SSR, and especially to brief parliamentarians involved in oversight of the security sector. This organization or institute could work with parliament staff to ensure a continual flow of relevant information, and could also offer courses focused on budgeting and budget analysis for parliamentarians.

Ninth, most Southern African countries have prisons that are urgently in need of reform. Those that have taken steps in this direction are making progress very slowly. The predominant prison culture remains traditional and grounded on punitive rather than corrective principles. SADC states need to change prisons from being places of hardship and suffering to institutions that offer the chance of rehabilitation. To do this, those managing places of detention need to create environments that show respect for the human rights of prisoners, and prepare them for reintegration into society when they have served their sentences. Such a transformation would also ensure that prisoners regain the right to vote, which is denied them in most countries in Southern Africa.
Tenth, there is need for in-depth research into, and greater interrogation of, the issue of war veterans. In a number of Southern African states, the struggle for liberation has left a legacy that continues to shape the attitudes of many who fought but have not adapted to civilian life. So far researchers have not addressed this important topic with sufficient rigour. A workshop or conference should be held to debate this phenomenon on the basis of properly-conducted research. One of the themes that would have to be raised would be the extent to which war veterans have played a role in influencing the outcome of democratic elections.

Finally, there is a need not only for extensive research into the issues of SSR and parliamentary oversight, but to find ways to put the results of this research to good use. At present, explanations of different security situations remain underdeveloped because very little research material has been made available to guide understanding. For instance, the political economy dynamics of the security sector have not been interrogated and knowledge around this important issue remains shallow and inadequate.

Documentation:
- Consolidating SADC's regional integration: The governance of the security sector (http://osisa.org/sites/default/files/security_sector.pdf)

Links:
- African Public Policy and Research Institute (http://www.appri.org.za/)
- ShareThis (http://osisa.org/open-debate/hrdb/regional/governance-security-sector-sadc)
- Governance (http://osisa.org/keywords/governance)parliament (http://osisa.org/keywords/parliament)