



practical, cross-sectional, modular, authoritative
guidance on security sector reform & governance

Series 12:

SSR assistance programmes

Module 12.1

How UN Senior Leaders Engage on Security Sector Reform & Governance



“I have seen first-hand how civilians were maltreated by troops and police. People’s properties were not properly protected. It was an issue of lack of accountability on the side of the troops, a lack of oversight bodies and authorities that should be giving direction to the armed forces. Above all we did not respect the civilians amongst which we work. (...) This is why the military and other security institutions must see security sector reform as in fact in their own interest. Because it helps them put in place rules and proper control arrangements, (that) demonstrate to the civilian public that indeed they are responsive to them, and accountable to them – they’re there to provide the security that is required by the people.”

Kellie Conteh, Minister of Defence, Sierra Leone

With **CROSSROADS**, the United Nations produces a set of user-friendly, action-oriented practical guidance notes that cover the full spectrum of security sector reform & governance (SSR&G).

On each topic, **CROSSROADS** modules provide policymakers and practitioners with foundational understanding, with current good practices from around the world, and with step-by-step options for action.

These modules reflect the UN's collective, evolving knowledge on an essential concern when building peace: how to make security institutions function so that they serve the greater good. **CROSSROADS** enables the Organization to support nationally owned work on SSR&G coherently and authoritatively – thus contributing to saving lives and improving livelihoods.

Introduction

The Security Council has tasked the Secretary-General's Special Representatives, Special Envoys and UN Resident Coordinators "to fully take into account the strategic value of security sector reform (SSR) in their work, including through their good offices."¹

Senior leaders of United Nations Country Teams should also develop a strengthened capacity "to absorb relevant peacebuilding functions, including any activities related to SSR following the drawdown and exit of Security Council-mandated missions."

This CROSSROADS module provides a brief, executive-level introduction to SSR and governance (SSR&G), and options for action. Senior leaders in regional organizations may also benefit from the content of this module.

¹ [S/RES/2553 \(2020\)](#).

1. Why this is important

In fragile countries in particular, many people feel unprotected by their own security institutions. When soldiers or police do not serve the common good, societal trust – so necessary for sustained prosperity and well-being – remains elusive. Privileged groups, including those in uniform, may reap the benefits of favouritism and repression, while development is denied to many.

Helping to establish security services that provide genuine human security is a direct interest of the UN's in-country presence: "the task of the UN is to support national actors in achieving their security, peace and development goals. To this end, the development of effective and accountable security institutions on the basis of non-discrimination, full respect for human rights and the rule of law is essential."²

² [\(A/62/659–S/2008/39\) Securing peace and development: the role of the United Nations in supporting security sector reform, Report of the Secretary-General.](#)

Some think SSR is mainly about improving readiness of defence forces and internal security services or providing them with equipment. Not at all. It is fundamentally a political process of establishing functioning procedures, checks and balances, transparency, and accountability in a sector often marred by opacity. It is institution-building and good-governance promotion close to the pinnacle of national power. Given SSR's highly political nature and its centrality to the UN's in-country success, senior UN leaders must engage on SSR&G early, strategically and consistently, including by facilitating dialogue on security governance arrangements.³

Throughout their engagement, UN leaders need to be aware of the **United Nations principles for SSR&G**, including:

- **Inclusive national ownership**
- The **primacy of political solutions**
- Ensuring a **governance-focused approach** at all stages of reform.⁴

UN support must also be guided by other relevant UN guidance, including the Organization's Human Rights Due Diligence Policy on UN support to Non-UN Security Forces (HRDDP) and gender.

³ [S/2022/280 Strengthening security sector reform, Report of the Secretary-General.](#)

⁴ [S/2022/280 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council "Strengthening security sector reform", March 2022.](#)

2. What we have learned

Security – of the State and its peoples – is a foundation for peace, development and human rights. Senior leaders have to put, and keep, security at the top of their agenda. While building and improving a reliable, effective security sector is a slow-moving process, SSR&G is critical to effective security provision (and prevention of insecurity) both in the immediate and long term.

SSR&G cannot be ignored. It must be addressed to avoid relapse into conflict. When reform is not taken up, persistent unaccountable concentrations of power, enabled by available weaponry, will drive conflict and get in the way of political stability and transition.

National ownership is a must-do, not a ‘nice-to-have’: “National ownership refers to an inclusive and consultative process, methodology and outcome that are

predicated on the perspectives, priorities and vision of stakeholders within the society undergoing reform”.⁵

SSR&G is foremost a political process, which requires engagement with national, regional and international stakeholders, including a range of UN entities. Technical equipment and support can contribute to transformation but can be harmful if not pursued under a common vision and coordination, nor accompanied by solid, constant political pressure to focus on improving governance.

SSR&G should address the security needs of the population as a whole, **including vulnerable groups, while taking into account gender and diversity**. This requires gathering and analyzing disaggregated information on the security needs experienced by different groups. Engagement with national authorities, as well as with civil society and at the community level, should be parallel first steps in any SSR&G process.

SSR&G is an essential element of peace processes, mediation and political dialogue. SSR&G has proven to gain traction as the political process advances. The use of good offices is indispensable for the design of a national SSR&G process that puts at its centre conflict drivers, distribution of power, and financial sustainability of reforms.

In settings of fragility, national institutions that are supposed to oversee security actors are often particularly weak. This situation is only worsened when donors focus on assisting with immediate military-operational priorities, as opposed to getting behind security sector governance, which often weakens accountability of security actors and institutions.

⁵ [Security Sector Reform Integrated Technical Guidance Notes, United Nations SSR Task Force, 2012.](#)

‘Political will’, defined as the “demonstrated credible intent of political actors”⁶, is a key factor in ensuring the effective implementation of comprehensive reform strategies. But power holders are often the greatest beneficiaries of *obstacles* to reform – favouritism, corruption, lack of accountability. ‘Political will’ is only a useful concept if it is unpacked.

In some fragile and conflict-affected countries, real decision-making power may rest outside of formal government institutions and in the hands of an elite that seeks to serve its own interests rather than the well-being of society as a whole. Generating political support for reforms in such situations is difficult because public officials benefiting from the status quo will resist the call for more transparency and accountability.

Indicators of a dearth in political will can include:

- Lack of follow-up on commitments made
- Lack of political agreements on SSR&G
- Weak or non-existent legal, policy and institutional frameworks
- Inadequate allocation of power and resources
- Lack of appropriate internal control mechanisms, sanctions, and enforcement.

On the other hand, signs of a presence of political will can include:

- Inclusive national ownership of SSR&G initiatives

Why start with the money?

- Armed forces that include soldiers who are well into their 70s – simply because there is no pension system in place
- Security spending that vastly exceeds domestic tax revenues
- A rudimentary manual payroll ‘system’, without registration, verification, or monitoring; and generals claiming to be in charge of troops that only exist on paper, so as to pocket the ‘salaries’ of these ghost soldiers
- Former members of armed groups, now to be integrated into armed forces, declaring their rank – and pay grade – should be that of the most senior officers

Security sector reform can only be successful if it starts with an understanding of the financial practices and decisions currently underpinning the sector. That understanding needs to be developed primarily in and by the government itself.

⁶ Brinkerhoff, D.W. 2000. Assessing political will for anti-corruption efforts: an analytic framework. Public Administration and Development, Vol. 20, No. 3.

- Government involvement of civil society
- Adequate resourcing of security sector institutions
- Long-term public commitment
- Existence of functional oversight authorities
- Application of sanctions.

8. **Mission leadership has a strategic role in convincing national leaders that it is in their long-term interest to lead an accountable and transparent security sector, including in terms of financing and budgetary allocations, that can be trusted by all.** When improving the functioning of any government sector, an important starting point is to understand how the money flows. In the security sector, political leaders often claim expenditure insights cannot be shared – even between government entities – for reasons of national security. But such confidentiality claims are often thin coverings for practices based on partiality and exploitation. Surely, prudence may be needed on some budgeting details, such as intelligence. But even in those instances there are ways to organize discrete parliamentary oversight of security expenditures. Public Expenditure Reviews of the security sector can also prove invaluable.

9. **SSR&G benchmarks have been a key feature of mission exit and transition strategies, and of successful country programmes.**

10. **When requested by national authorities, the UN is in a good position to coordinate different stakeholders,** specifically to align international partners behind nationally owned reforms and for facilitating reforms that address key drivers of conflict.

11. **It is essential to mainstream human rights, gender and youth perspectives throughout SSR&G,** including by working towards the solid

participation of women in the security sector and strengthening the role of the UN in supporting gender-responsive SSR&G.

12. **As a priority, senior leaders must help national security sectors to ‘serve in the storm’, i.e. continue to provide effective and accountable security during the climate crisis.** Attention should focus on how national security institutions can mitigate, adapt, respond to and cooperate (MARC) during the climate crisis, both as an operational imperative and, in the context of the Paris Agreement, to effectively fulfil their respective State’s legal and moral obligations under international climate law.⁷

13. **SSR&G language should be adapted to the context,** so that the use of terminology does not cause resistance to the actual process. ‘Security sector development’ and ‘security sector transformation’ are, for example, sometimes terms that national counterparts prefer.

⁷ See the CROSSROADS module on SSR and climate change.

3. Options for action

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1. Prepare, build a team and marshal resources as soon as possible.

Effectively supporting SSR includes supplementing one's strengths with a team of senior political and security experts (both in-country and at UNHQ), and identifying support options such as:

- a) **In-briefings** on SSR&G and the country's political-security landscape, prior to deployment, from the UNSSRU, as well as UN country experts in-country and/or at UNHQ => Contact ssr@un.org
- b) **Peer-to-peer exchange/opportunities and mentoring** with senior leaders with SSR experience (current and past), as well as senior police and defence experts, to discuss SSR&G practices that have (and have not) worked in similar settings => Contact ssr@un.org
- c) **The rapidly deployable UN SSR&G standing capacity (SSuRGe Team**, based in Brindisi), which is the UNSSRU's operational arm, and its system of swiftly available expertise from a range of international partners => Contact ssr@un.org
- d) **UN SSR&G knowledge hub and community of practice**, administered by the UNSSRU => Contact ssr@un.org

e) **Donors and funding mechanisms** such as the Peacebuilding Fund and DCO support to RCs.

2. Understand the context

As stressed by the Secretary-General, “while capacity-building is important, including by providing entry points for reforms, **it is vital to understand the political and economic role of institutions from the perspective of different actors and communities**”.⁸ This is a critical task for senior leaders and requires a “whole-of-mission” analysis and understanding. This would require action to:

a) **Gather and analyze information relevant to the security sector**, including gender-sensitive and youth-responsive mapping of actors (including State, non-State actors, neighbouring countries and donors) and their needs, interests, incentives, positions and power dynamics. This should include determining how political will exists for SSR&G in-country, and with a country’s partners.

Understanding the security sector should draw on a diverse audience, including relevant national, regional and international actors, from government and non-government.

b) **Ensure that sufficient resources are in place** for continuous information-gathering, assessments, reviews and analysis (see item one above for support options).

3. Facilitate dialogue, will and ownership

To take action, national politicians will need at least some imagination – some capacity to envision how things might be different. **Senior leaders can feed into political imagination by convincingly outlining the benefits of positive change.** Note that politicians might apply their ‘political will’ mainly to enhance their individual influence and reputation. Believing that constructive SSR serves such

⁸ [S/2022/280 Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council “Strengthening security sector reform”, March 2022.](#)

purposes, makes their engagement likely. Obviously, senior UN leaders may lack influence with national leaders, politicians, power-centres and/or change champions. But **there is much that UN leaders can do to shape public debates and elite perceptions, and in this area attempts are often worth making.** Still, even when personally convinced of the need for strengthened security sector governance, national politicians will assess whether the sought reforms are likely to succeed. They will weigh factors such as:

- Capacity of political / administrative instruments
- Material resources
- Institutional impediments
- Opposition from interest groups.
- Gendered considerations

Senior leaders need to understand the underlying reasons for limited political will. They can also assist national leaders to understand the value of embarking on strengthening security sector governance, and to support sustainable economic development and foreign direct investment. One of the most powerful vehicles to that end is for the government to undertake a public expenditure review of the security sector.

4. Help identify what needs to be done

Help national partners develop a national vision of what needs to be done, including through support to national dialogue processes, national security assessments, national security planning and SSR&G needs assessments. Planning should adopt predictive and foresight-oriented methodologies, which are climate, gender and youth-responsive, especially considering the increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world. Resources towards this need to be aligned early and focus on sustainability and a country's needs, not on donors' priorities.

5. **Lead coherent 'One-UN' support to national priorities: bring the team to the table**

- a) **Broker UN/international-national agreements** on the type of support that can be expected in support of national priorities.
- b) Remember that a large number of UN actors can (and need to) be involved in supporting national SSR&G. It is important to **rally the UN team around a common vision and get it working in a team ('one UN')-oriented manner**, including:

- i. **Formulate an overarching UN support strategy and plan for SSR&G support** to ensure coherent and impactful UN assistance. As noted above, supporting nationally led all-inclusive SSR&G is a UN-wide job. It requires the support – and strengths – of many UN entities and always involves other multilateral and/or bilateral partners. Entry points for SSR&G may be found, for example, in national development plans or in the broader sustainable development agenda. Of course, support strategies must drive impact while avoiding harm. For example, consider how to support a country to address the issue of militias beyond State control, particularly in cases where such militias have vast economic power and/or local legitimacy.⁹
- ii. Given the multitude of UN entities involved, **establish a UN working group on SSR&G and/or create a 'leadership circle'** with senior security advisors (civilian, police and defence), pool resources and coordinate efforts. Think strategically about the different types of expertise that will be needed at different stages including political analysis, budgeting, planning, human rights, climate, gender, police and military advisors.

6. **Lay the groundwork for SSR&G**

- a) **Focus on building trust and confidence with and between relevant national actors that may create conditions conducive for SSR&G down the road.** Consider

⁹ Reflection provided by interviewed UN senior leader.

the national political landscape to build in incentives for national leadership interest in embarking on an SSR&G process. Some aspects of SSR&G are conducive to inclusion of communities and civil society, such as community safety and emergency response. Often such typically ‘low-confrontational’-type issues can pave the way for more robust engagement with security actors, as well as establishing an expectation for civil-society involvement in security decision-making.

b) Think in terms of early confidence-building measures without losing sight of the long-term objectives of reform and governance issues. Are there any “low-hanging fruits”, upcoming symbolic anniversaries, or issues around which consensus can be built, that can serve to open the door for a broader discussion around SSR&G? This could include kickstarting activities that have short-term impact (i.e., capacity-building projects, elections, economic recovery programmes). Cross-cutting areas can also constitute interesting entry points including climate, respect for human rights by the security institutions, political economy analysis, or gender and youth mainstreaming.

c) Use good offices to seek political agreements that will establish a vision of the security sector and enable technical expertise to proceed. Maintain dialogue and promote coordination between national actors in order to leverage support and mainstream messaging. This includes talking to both State and non-state actors (including women and youth organizations) also in settings where certain groups might not be talking to one another, for example armed groups on the one hand and the national government on the other.

7. Reflect on the role of the UN senior leader

To ensure success, **senior leaders should reflect on their hopes, concerns, strengths and areas for growth.** As identified by some senior interviewees, not all senior leaders have national security and/or SSR experience and might, therefore, sometimes feel “out of their comfort zone” on SSR&G issues. Hesitation by senior leaders towards engaging on SSR&G might also be related to concerns that tangible

progress may not be made, to reputational risk (both organizational and personal), to the risk of unwanted consequences causing further conflict or violence, or to issues related to the implementation of other UN mandates or national requests. Identification of strengths and areas for growth in this regard, well before deployment, is critical to success.

Senior leaders interviewed for this module highlighted the following qualities as conducive to successful engagement in SSR&G:

a) **Honesty, integrity, trustworthiness and humility.** Before taking action, seek first to understand. It is important to establish relationships of mutual respect with national interlocutors and build trust while modelling honesty and reliability. Senior leaders should also acknowledge and respect the primacy of national actors to take key SSR&G decisions.

b) **Inclusion.** Encourage inclusive engagement and collaboration, including through coordination that can help senior leaders better navigate their respective “comfort zones” (i.e. with security and other experts)

c) **Patience.** Take time to understand, manage expectations and to mediate conflict or disagreement between national stakeholders, between national and international stakeholders, and within the UN family, rather than rushing into capacity building. SSR&G is foremost a political process, which requires tact, good judgement, and a combination of listening and proposal-making. While some results might be obvious immediately, SSR&G is a long-term process and, therefore, other results – and deeper impact – might take time to witness.

4. How to measure progress

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In order to measure the **progress made by UN senior leaders in SSR&G** the following indicators are proposed:

1. Senior UN leadership has **SMART SSR&G performance criteria**, especially with regards to their political, national security and SSR&G responsibilities and good offices roles, i.e. their **ToRs and performance evaluations** include national security and SSR&G goals and success criteria.
2. Is the UN entity effectively implementing its **Security Council mandate** on SSR, against benchmarks in Security Council resolutions?
3. Is the UN entity effectively delivering to **national requests and priorities**, including with regard to coordination?
4. Is the UN entity prioritizing the **climate, gender and WPS agendas**?
5. SSR&G is included in the **broader political analysis** of the host country (e.g. UN Common Country Analysis), **peace operation strategy**, **UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework** and those of other relevant UN entities in-country.

6.SSR&G is included as a separate section in the **annual budget plans** of peace operations and other relevant UN entities to foster senior leadership's commitments and M&E.

7.UN senior leaders have established **working relations** with relevant senior national and, where relevant, international stakeholders in pursuit of developing consensus for a positive strategic vision of SSR&G as well as national oversight mechanisms to monitor implementation – and bring up the urgency of progress on SSR&G regularly in these meetings.

8.UN senior leaders integrate **SSR&G messaging in their reporting** (i.e. quarterly SG reports on UN missions) and **communications with stakeholders**.

Further reading

Resolutions

[S/RES/2151 \(2014\) - Security Council resolution 2151 \(2014\)](#)

[S/RES/2553 \(2020\) - Security Council resolution 2553 \(2020\)](#)

Policies

[Human Rights Due Diligence Policy \(HRDDP\), July 2011.](#)

Guidelines

The United Nations and Security Sector Reform. Policy and Practice. DCAF, Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. Edited by Adedeji Ebo and Heiner Hänggi, 2020.

[Security Sector Reform Integrated Technical Guidance Notes, United Nations SSR Task Force, 2012.](#)

Other resources

[S/2022/280 - Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council "Strengthening security sector reform", March 2022.](#)

[A/62/659 - S/2008/39 - Securing peace and development: the role of the United Nations in supporting security sector reform, Report of the Secretary-General.](#)

[A/67/970-S/2013/480 - Report of the Secretary-General Securing States and societies: strengthening the United Nations comprehensive support to security sector reform.](#)

"Towards Better Security Governance: Learning from the Road Travelled", *An independent review of United Nations support to security sector reform in peace operations, 2014-2020.*

EU Civilian Training Group, Training Requirement Analysis, Report on Leadership & Management Training, July 2021. By FBA, GCSP, ZIF, Maynooth University and three police academies.

Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, *The Art of Leadership in the United Nations: Painting perspectives, staying true to principles*, (Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, 2022).

Kleinfeld, R, *A Savage Order: How the World's Deadliest Countries Can Forge a Path to Security* (New York 2018).

Transparency International, *Building Political Will. Topical Guide* (Berlin 2015) www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic_Guide_Political_Will.pdf.

UN Values and Behaviours Framework ([UN Values and Behaviours Framework | HR Portal](#)) and the [United Nations System Leadership Framework \(United Nations System Leadership Framework\)](#)

United Nations / World Bank, *Federal Republic of Somalia Security and Justice Sector Public Expenditure Review* (New York / Washington DC 2017)

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/644671486531571103/pdf/Somalia-Security-and-justice-sector-public-expenditure-review.pdf>.

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