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Securing its success, justifying its relevance

Mapping a way forward for
Security Sector Reform

As Security Sector Reform (SSR) faces pressure to address new issues and threats, the moment is right to assess unresolved issues concerning both the concept and the practice of SSR. Four points stand out as essential to improving SSR initiatives. First, SSR efforts require a more nuanced balance of support for state actors and their informal counterparts, to reflect more accurately the realities of security provision in different political contexts. Second, while continuing to strengthen security actors' capacity, SSR's original focus on governance and political analysis of the security sector needs to be more central to such efforts. Third, SSR programs must be longer in duration, more iterative in approach and less prescriptive in terms of expected outcomes. Lastly, as modern security threats come into sharper focus on the international community's agenda, particularly threats posed by transnational organized crime and violent extremism, SSR must not fall into the trap of 'solving security problems' or becoming a quick-fix solution. Rather, it needs to be more carefully applied, in line with its original core tenets.

Introduction¹

Some analysts have stated that Security Sector Reform (SSR) is in 'crisis'. A few suggest wholesale reconceptualization of the notion of statebuilding, and of SSR as one of its key components. Others have argued that the survival of the term SSR is irrelevant, as long as its underlying principles continue to guide international efforts to improve security and justice. Finally, many draw attention to the gap between political

enthusiasm for SSR as a concept and the uneven track record of SSR in practice.

Whichever perception is the most appropriate, it is clear that the concept of SSR has not fully matured. As to SSR programming, innovation is taking place but the quality varies significantly. Two primary factors are: excessive focus on capacity over governance improvements; and failure to adjust programming approaches to local realities. In consequence, the track record of SSR remains underwhelming.

First discussing the historical development of SSR over the past 15 years, the brief then analyzes a number of recent trends that are likely to affect the aims and application

¹ The authors warmly thank Dylan Hendrickson (King's College), Mark Sedra (Security Governance Group) and Eric Scheye for their insights, contributions to and review of this policy brief.

of SSR in the near future. In closing, we propose seven concrete research, policy and programming actions that could help development actors to improve the policy and practice of SSR.

SSR's emergence and evolution

At the turn of the millennium, governance and security were gradually becoming standard elements of development discussion and policy. Emerging as a concept in 1999, SSR focuses on the parallel improvement of both the effectiveness of security and justice provision and the quality of governance in situations where their under-supply formed a barrier to broader development. In time, the SSR concept came to be largely understood through the prism of peacebuilding, which led to an emphasis on post-conflict environments. The peacebuilding paradigm tended to implicitly assume that peace agreements marked a new political beginning, with the possibility of accelerated change, high levels of local ownership and support for such change among domestic elites, and significant scope for external intervention. These assumptions – and their influence on SSR programming – were not subjected to scrutiny at the time, nor were there rigorous assessments of the relative chances of success for SSR in different political settings. This meant that the “*tabula rasa*” assumptions and relatively technical approaches of SSR went largely unchallenged.

Later in the 2000s, SSR also became part of the emerging statebuilding agenda. The foundation of this agenda is rooted in the belief that democratization, economic liberalization and building state capacity offers the best way out of poor governance, violence and poverty. Hence, the ability of the state to provide effective and accountable security remains a cornerstone of statebuilding initiatives. In the wake of 9/11, states exhibiting challenges to their capacity and authority were increasingly perceived as a source of global instability. This perception prompted heavy international investment in the erection of state institutions to manage violence, but focused

far less on drivers of conflict, insecurity and the quality of governance. Such train-and-equip approaches, largely catering to donor and domestic elite interests, have particularly been adopted under the aegis of the ‘war on terror’. Consider, for example, the generous military support extended by the US to the Egyptian and Pakistani governments, under the label of SSR despite comparatively limited focus on governance or people-centered security.²

In addition, the statebuilding paradigm projects a strong tendency towards social engineering, with OECD countries implicitly used as models for the desired end-state; this is despite numerous statements on the prime importance of context, and broad recognition of the relevance of politics, patronage and pluralism. The tendency has perpetuated the relatively technical approach that was already prevalent under the peacebuilding paradigm. For example, the EU Security Sector Reform Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (EUSEC) has largely failed to make progress in security forces’ adherence to democratic oversight, in part due to the government’s ability to insist on mainly technical support, leaving its local systems of patronage governance undisturbed.³

- 2 Burt, G. (2011), *US “SSR” Assistance in Egypt: What’s in a Name?*, CIGI Blog post online <http://www.ssrresourcecentre.org/2011/02/17/us-%e2%80%9cssr%e2%80%9d-assistance-in-egypt-what%e2%80%99s-in-a-name/>; Londoño, E., 22 April 2014, *U.S. to partially resume military aid to Egypt*, Washington Post, online http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-to-partially-resume-military-aid-to-egypt/2014/04/22/b25f68c6-ca91-11e3-93eb-6c0037dde2ad_story.html; Fair, C. (2012), *Security Sector Governance in Pakistan: Progress, But Many Challenges Persist*, CIGI SSR Issue Papers No. 5, online http://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/SSR_Issue_no5.pdf.
- 3 More, S. and M. Price (2011), *The EU’s Support to Security System Reform in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Perceptions from the field in Spring 2010*, Clingendael Institute, The Hague; and Kets, E. and H. de Vries (2014), *Limits to supporting security sector interventions in the DRC*, Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria.

Given its development chronicled above, it is perhaps unsurprising that SSR has run into a number of conceptual and practical difficulties. Central to these is the clash between, on the one hand, the top-down application of SSR as part of efforts to build more capable state institutions, and, on the other, the prevailing political and practical realities in contexts where SSR is implemented.⁴ The failure of the international community to explore address this tension more creatively and the lack of empirical learning in SSR has allowed the concept to be propelled by ambitions and assumptions, making it harder to correct its flawed premises.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that promising experimentation is taking place, as for example through the ‘Burundian-Dutch Security Sector Development programme’ or the Nigerian-DfID ‘Justice for All in Nigeria programme’. Embedded in these initiatives are innovative practices and approaches to ensure that technical progress is matched with political engagement, that actors of different stripes are involved, and that results are collaboratively defined to reflect local realities, rather than pre-determined outcomes.

In the final analysis, as long as insecurity and a lack of access to justice remain major obstacles to development, SSR is likely to retain a central role in internationally supported recovery and development efforts. The extent to which a reinvigorated SSR approach will continue to hold promise in the future, however, will largely be determined by how it responds to emerging trends and challenges.

Responding to current trends in SSR

The future relevance and success of SSR depends to a significant extent on how current trends influence its direction and application. The five trends analyzed below can in part be traced back to the unresolved challenges that result from SSR’s position in the peacebuilding and statebuilding agendas. They also reflect broader developments in the nature of modern insecurity and organized violence and represent opportunities to hone better responses.

Trend #1: *Researchers and policy-makers increasingly acknowledge that SSR needs to engage actors ‘beyond the state’.* International development actors have long oriented their SSR efforts to reflect the liberal peace agenda, promoting ‘Western’ standards of democratization and establishing a monopoly on coercive force. This normative pursuit has discouraged many international actors from working with unfamiliar customary systems, and limited them to engaging state actors irrespective of their shortcomings. Though external actors may realize that the state is not ‘benign’, they nevertheless engage with it, whether in pursuit of their own interests, out of perceived necessity or expediency. In some cases, this support to reinforce state coercive capacities can distract attention away from mechanisms and structures of marginalization and exclusion or, worse yet, entrench them.⁵

The thinking behind strengthening state institutions is that such work, if done well, translates into better security and justice provision for the citizens. This approach is based on two dubious assumptions. The first is that an overall politically-neutral environment of service orientation is in place, allowing capacity-building interventions to lead directly to better institutional performance. This assumption does not

4 For further elaboration, see Andersen, L. (2011), *Security Sector Reform and the Dilemmas of Liberal Peacebuilding*, Working Paper No. 31, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen.

5 A troubling pattern that has also emerged from the ‘war on terror’. See Ahmed, A. (2013), *The Thistle and the Drone: How America’s War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*, Brookings Institute, Washington D.C.

account for intervening factors, such as elite interests, inter-organizational competition and poor external accountability, which can undo the positive effects of institutional strengthening. The second assumption is that state security institutions are well regarded and service most of the population. However, informal security and justice providers, where they exist, are often more relevant, prevalent and better trusted than their state cousins, yet rarely receive substantial support. Open debate persists about the trade-offs in supporting informal actors, who are often seen as variable in quality, reliability and principles. However, the same can be said of many state actors. Hence, this normative debate is largely a red herring. More salient questions regarding the constructive support of informal actors include: 1) is such support replicable on different scales?; 2) what are the longer-term consequences of creating a 'patchwork' of informal providers?; and 3) how to negotiate such engagement with the host government partner?⁶

Engaging both state and informal actors has been gaining support over the past few years. This trend has been underpinned by research suggesting that simultaneously engaging state institutions and "other layers of security and justice provision" can increase the sustainability of SSR efforts.⁷ The next step is operationalizing this increased awareness into donor program design, skill sets and tools.

Trend #2: Donors are slowly exploring what it means to invest political capital into SSR efforts. In its earliest version, SSR was championed as an alternative to overly technical, politically detached military support programs. But this trademark of SSR soon proved difficult to realize in practice. As control over the security apparatus amounts to control over the instruments of rule-by-enforcement, externally supported SSR is

often met with blatant or furtive domestic resistance.⁸ Recognition of the political nature of SSR has grown appreciably; nevertheless, SSR efforts have been inadequately designed and implemented for their role in a process of social contestation and political negotiation. This renders such programs unsustainable or irrelevant and can enable domestic elites to use donor support for their own agendas.

Addressing this will require more explicit assessments of the trade-offs that SSR initiatives often have to make between serving donor priorities, elite interests and the population's needs. For example, in contexts of mixed security provision, many donors and state representatives emphasize the need to establish the state's monopoly on coercion. However, endowing one actor, such as the state, with additional resources enables it to undermine or suppress other actors or systems that might enjoy more local legitimacy and/or provide for a larger portion of the population. Moreover, this can allow the preferred partner to sidestep important political processes that could help to determine what security configurations best serve the domestic context.

To a certain extent, donors are challenged to understand and apply SSR not as part of an exit strategy, but rather as an entry point for a much longer-term process of political engagement and negotiation.⁹ From this perspective, donors can help to create space for a wider array of local actors to discuss and debate the nature of and solutions to their domestic security problems. This also implies that donors relinquish some expectations of steering these conversations more directly toward preconceived outcomes.

6 Derks, M. (2011) *Improving Security and Justice through Local/Non-State Actors*, Clingendael Institute, Hague.

7 Baker, B. and E. Scheye (2007), 'Multi-layered Justice and Security Delivery in Post-conflict and Fragile States', in: *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol.7 (4).

8 Understanding 'local ownership' in line with liberal democratic principles also means that any lack of progress in SSR endeavors can be put down to 'a lack of local political will' – ignoring the fact that key domestic actors might actually subscribe to different approaches, end-states and even principles.

9 Dursun-Ozkanca, O. and A. Vandemoortele (2012), 'The European Union and Security Sector Reform: current practices and challenges of implementation', in: *European Security*, Vol. 21(2).

Negotiating these processes in a post-conflict environment is especially challenging, given the increased mistrust and reduced social capital typical of such settings. Consequently in these contexts, improvements in governance are hard to realize and capacity improvements risk imbalance. Hence, the chance of SSR initiatives being successful can be especially slight in the early stages of a country's post-conflict trajectory. For example, in South Sudan, UNMIS(S) SSR efforts have been repeatedly frustrated, and previous gains are now being visibly reversed.¹⁰

Trend #3: *Policy-makers and practitioners are gradually refining the tools they use to assess the impact and efficacy of SSR programs in a way that accounts for empirical changes in people's behavior and quality of life.* Monitoring and evaluation routines have been typically led by a rather linear and quantitative focus on countable outputs. While such approaches are relatively easy, cheap and marketable, they reveal little about the way communities and individuals experience security and justice. For example, a drop in the number of homicides may in fact indicate the complete dominance of a violent group in a certain area, and thus may not be a reliable indicator of people's felt security.

As the limitations of such assessments have gradually been recognized, new methods for assessing the impact of security and justice programs, such as popular perception surveys and Theory of Change type approaches, are gaining momentum. Nevertheless, more innovation and investment could improve the means of tracking qualitative progress of SSR initiatives in terms of interpersonal or intergroup relations, progress on the types of issues being addressed, or through popular perceptions of security actors' accountability and performance.

Trend #4: *International development actors are realizing that their operating approaches and toolkits are often insufficiently fit for purpose in fragile environments.* The reality has begun to sink in that the complexity of fragile environments often goes beyond the level of understanding, approaches and tools that the international community can bring to bear. For one, many SSR efforts have been based on a flawed assessment of the speed of change at which security improvements can be accomplished. As an example, while SSR has become a common feature in peacekeeping mandates, their short time horizons are better suited to initial stabilization and technical assistance than to bringing about complex governance improvements. The same holds true for many SSR development objectives.

Most bilateral SSR interventions to date have also suffered from crippling short timelines (typically four years or less), making it difficult to build critical relationships necessary to meaningfully address governance issues. In addition, the usefulness of mobilizing Western technical experts in the service of SSR initiatives in fragile environments has often proven to be of limited value. Although these problems are well documented, it would appear that senior donor officials have not been able or willing to build domestic support for more innovative approaches in the face of public skepticism and resource constraints. In short, the common SSR toolkit is, so to speak, is not sufficiently attuned to highly complex situations, which require more flexibility, longevity and a broader wealth of experience.

Trend #5: *Western politicians and policy-makers are increasing their focus on contemporary security challenges as key policy issues and are considering SSR as a viable response.* The dilemma here is that SSR is neither about directly solving a country's security and justice problems, nor about quick fixes. Nevertheless, it is increasingly applied as such. Researchers and practitioners warn against conflating SSR with more narrowly focused and short-term security interventions. Here there is a serious risk that strengthening the tools of security provision becomes the entire response instead of just a part of it. This

10 Hutton, L. (2014), *Prolonging the agony of UNMISS: The implementation challenges of a new mandate during a civil war*, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit Policy Brief, The Hague.

can crowd out issues and responses that ordinary people perceive most relevant. The key is to retain and expand SSR's focus on governance and integrated analysis while working to improve security and justice provision. To avoid a more reductionist version of SSR, policy-makers and practitioners must more carefully discern where, when and how SSR is best applied.

With this last trend in mind, the following four issues, all at the forefront of contemporary security discussions, each provide discrete opportunities to discuss whether and how SSR can be usefully applied in a way that upholds its original aims and tenets.

- *Transnational organized crime and its influence on stability and security.* Approaches that are strictly based on law-enforcement have long been the stock in trade of many crime-fighting strategies, and SSR could easily become the instrument of choice for building police or paramilitary forces to combat illicit trafficking. This approach risks doing serious harm if it is not balanced with measures to address socio-economic drivers of organized crime and improve the accountability and governance regime of security forces, which are frequently complicit in organized crime themselves. A more genuine and promising application of SSR as a means of dealing with the problem of criminal networks is to work towards making security forces more insulated from political pressures or illicit co-optation, and more accountable to the public.
- *Countering violent extremism and radicalization.* It has proven very difficult to reduce the threat of violent extremism through direct external intervention, stabilization and reconstruction. This partially explains why the current (largely US)¹¹ policy recipe focuses on boosting domestic counter-terrorist capabilities with drones, special forces and train-and-equip efforts in, for example, Yemen and

Nigeria. A number of these efforts will undoubtedly be branded as 'SSR'. This creates the risk that the expediency of building larger and more efficient police and military forces to combat terrorism overshadows efforts at fundamental governance reform, leaving underlying drivers of radicalization intact, or even aggravating them.¹² A clear example is how US-led efforts to rebuild the Iraqi army after the second Gulf War were quickly instrumentalized for sectarian gain, through the politicization of the army's officer corps. A more promising angle in respect of violent extremism may be to use SSR to focus on community security initiatives, engaging the wider cast of security actors and providers in order to consolidate more inclusive security and governance arrangements.

- *Addressing porous borders.* Borders are increasingly seen as key barriers against presumed 'tidal waves' of organized crime, terrorism and migration. Such a view leads to a border security approach focused on control, segregation and enforcement. Extreme examples hereof can be witnessed in the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel. SSR can easily be applied as a way to build and strengthen paramilitary-style border capacity. If this is done without considering border security forces as part and parcel of the wider security system, acknowledging their role in facilitating traditional and legitimate cross-border movements, or giving attention to their potential complicity in illicit cross-border activities, developmental gains are not to be expected. Instead, there is an opportunity to apply SSR in regional approaches that advance collective security and ensure that border security is judiciously governed and integrated with other nodes of the security system.

11 For example: Adams, G. 5 August 2014, *The Great Security Shift*, Foreign Policy Magazine.

12 For example: Van Veen, E. (2013), *The New Face of Terror: A Partnership between Kleptocrats, State-builders and Terrorists*, Clingendael Opinion, online <http://www.clingendael.nl/publication/new-face-terror-partnership-between-kleptocrats-state-builders-and-extremists>.

- *The particular nature and increasing peril of crime and violence in urban settings.* Demographers and economists in recent years have noted dramatic shifts of populations into urban areas. Chaotic urban expansion can easily overwhelm the capacity of municipal authorities in low- and middle-income countries, and SSR may be seen as a ready-made way to strengthen the local security apparatus. The trap to avoid is allowing SSR to be pulled toward or aligned with ‘iron fist’ approaches. Rather, there are opportunities for SSR initiatives to increase urban security more comprehensively by joining up with community security, armed violence reduction and municipal development interventions. For example, helping police forces maintain community relations within highly diverse and dense populations and keeping security forces sufficiently accessible (and accountable) to different social groups are two issues in particular where SSR innovation will be necessary to address urban security in the coming years.

With these trends in mind, some of the more experimentally inclined proponents of SSR (including Sweden, Denmark, the UK and the Netherlands) have made modest investments in exploring options to support actors who may blur or fall outside the legal strictures of the state. Policy-makers are also cautiously acknowledging that SSR is inevitably political in nature, time-consuming, iterative and high risk, and realize these characteristics need to be reflected in approaches to programming.¹³ Finally, forthcoming donor reflections (from Switzerland, the US and the Netherlands) on the relations between organized crime, violence and development suggest it may be possible to avoid repeating the way SSR was

instrumentalized in the ‘war on terror’. Such developments provide a strong basis for like-minded states to effectively collaborate in multilateral forums and for innovative programs to guard against the distortion or erosion of SSR’s development principles.

Future directions

The aim of SSR is to provide a useful set of guidelines for international development initiatives that seek to dismantle the ‘barriers of insecurity’. To strengthen its contribution, policy-makers in bilateral and multilateral development organizations, as well as in field-based NGOs, should consider seven actions in research, policy and programming to increase the efficacy of their SSR work.

Research

Recommendation #1: *Develop greater insight into the political inroads and operational requirements for successful SSR in different political contexts and reflect findings in international approaches, organization and tools.* A research effort is needed to establish the potential for SSR to stimulate governance and capacity improvements in different types of political environments. The research should produce greater clarity regarding both the realistic expectations appropriate for SSR initiatives in the most difficult environments and the opportunities to extend SSR initiatives to relatively stable countries that still face significant security problems (for example Kenya or Nigeria). The underlying issue is that much SSR work has focused on immediate post-conflict settings in a rather technical fashion, making governance improvements elusive and neglecting more stable settings.

Recommendation #2: *Develop policy and programming strategies capable of interacting with domestic elite interests in different political settings in a way that opens up space for more transformative SSR.* In most cases, it is likely that the provision of security has been structured to reflect the interests of those in power. Therefore, if SSR strategies and programs are to deliver on their governance aspirations, it is important that they accurately identify and constructively

¹³ Report of the Secretary-General (2013), *Securing States and societies: strengthening the United Nations comprehensive support to security sector reform*, A/67/970-S/2013/480, 13 August 2013. The Dutch Security Sector Development Program in Burundi offers some innovative approaches for other donors to reflect upon. See Ball, N. (2014), *Putting Governance at the Heart of Security Sector Reform*, Clingendael Institute, The Hague.

interact with such interests, whether on the basis of contestation or cooperation. There has been little systematic analysis of SSR programs from this perspective. Understanding which change strategies for SSR programs are the most viable in different political contexts could be a useful starting point for context-specific applications.

Recommendation #3: *Generate a stronger understanding of how support for the state can be better balanced with support for informal security providers in the short term without creating new long-term security problems.* Research should be commissioned that focuses initially on clarifying important questions, such as: how can informal actors be supported in ways that are sustainable and compatible with the longer-term development of the state; and what approach and tools must international actors use in order to have a chance of engaging productively with informal providers?

Policy

Recommendation #4: *Obtain political agreement within donor administrations for longer timescales for SSR programs, and anchor this in policy and programming guidelines.* The typical 3- to 4-year lifespan for most SSR programs is too short to build the relations, trust and insight required for stimulating long-term change, especially in the area of governance. Donor administrations need to translate this existing insight into policy and practice by gaining political buy-in from their ministers and parliaments to extend SSR program horizons to beyond 5 years. This will open the door to more iterative approaches to programming based on learning, experience and the seizing of political opportunities. Corresponding financial commitments can be periodically adjusted to reflect inevitable political changes. In parallel, this discussion needs to be taken up by UN and EU Member States to argue for mandates longer than the typical 6–12 months allotted for peacekeeping and crisis management missions. If this is not possible, there should be strong reconsideration of whether missions ought to be in the lead for SSR work, since changes in security governance require more time to come to fruition.

Recommendation #5: *Improve existing approaches to SSR programming and available SSR expertise.* The current set of tools that is used to implement SSR programs is incomplete at best. Major weaknesses include the linear design, implementation and evaluation of most programs,¹⁴ the overly ‘Western’ nature of technical expertise, and a lack of experts in development administrations who combine diplomatic with substantive skills. Two actions would help bring about significant improvement. First, bilateral donors need to start an internal discussion on how their approaches to SSR programming (including rules and regulations) can be made more flexible and reflective of reality. Second, funds need to be invested in active networks or rosters that nurture and mobilize SSR expertise from developing countries. Although such rosters provide no guarantee of success, the shortcomings of current expert networks are well known. The mechanism of the UK Stabilization Unit’s roster may provide an example to emulate.

Programming

Recommendation #6: *Develop a problem-oriented programming approach that can be scaled up from initial entry points.* Some programming approaches focus on putting SSR strategy, policy and decision-making architectures in place, while others focus on institutional capacity-building. Neither type of approach has delivered outstanding results. The former tend to become paper exercises, the latter result in kits and training without directly improving security. Hence, a more promising approach might be to take concrete problems as a starting point for programs, which can subsequently be used as entry points into other issues, enabling both incremental development and scaling-up of programs. Criteria for identifying concrete starting points could be: (1) The issue matters to communities and/or ‘ordinary citizens’, which can be established, for example, through large-N perception surveys or focus groups;

14 Among other things, this leads to a lack of involvement of evaluators in program design where key lessons and good practices can be most directly applied.

(2) There is a significant security and/or justice component in its drivers, definition or required response; (3) Its resolution requires the involvement of multiple security and/or justice organizations; and (4) Its resolution ultimately requires issues of broader organizational governance to be addressed.

Recommendation #7: *Start, or continue, one or two SSR programs that are explicitly designed to experiment and innovate, and have been agreed at political level, in order to overcome some of the difficulties raised above.*

Many practical insights exist that can improve SSR programs, but it will take experimentation to further hone such ideas and provide practical working examples. This can only be done by exposing ideas to reality. The Burundian-Dutch and Nigerian-DfID programs already mentioned offer promising examples and waypoints. Such experiential programs should have an inbuilt 'real-time' research component that provides input and learning as they develop, to enable concurrent, in-course improvement. When carried out in partnership with a local institution, they also provide a way to better anchor the effort locally.

About the Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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About the authors

Erwin van Veen is a Senior Research Fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. He specializes in understanding the politics and change dynamics of security and justice provision, as well as modern conflict dynamics and the nature of associated peace processes.

Megan Price is a Research Fellow at Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit. She contributes research on international strategies for supporting security reform in fragile settings. Her current research focuses on security provision as a negotiated political process, and the role of informal and non-conventional actors in statebuilding.