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»» The security sector: a key factor in development and yet a challenge to development cooperation

One Pager

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As the number of crises around the world continues to grow, so too the security sector moves further to the heart of the debate surrounding development policy.

What is the security sector?

There is no common international understanding of the activities and elements that make up a national security sector. According to the traditional understanding, the security sector is an instrument focused on internal and external security, pursuing a primary goal of securing territorial integrity and state sovereignty on the basis of a monopoly on physical force by the state. In many westernised democracies, this view has been replaced by a broader understanding, where the protection of the individual and human dignity is also at the heart of policy surrounding security. Under this view, the security sector not only includes military bodies, the police and intelligence services, it also comprises an independent justice system as well as efficient and effective constitutional principles (mainly democratic legitimacy and control over the relevant institutions and instruments). The duties of the security sector therefore expand accordingly as they explicitly incorporate the effective protection of citizens against (state) encroachments.

Significance in development cooperation (DC)

A sufficiently effective and efficient security sector is a key prerequisite for development – without a minimum degree of security and rule of law, efforts to support a country's social and economic development will not succeed. Security therefore forms the basis for achieving all of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), whether it be alleviating poverty, protecting human rights or ensuring a sustainable supply of water, energy and education.

What distinguishes an efficient and effective security sector?

According to the understanding provided above, an ideal security sector is based on institutions that

- hold a clearly defined yet limited legal or constitutional mandate;
- are democratically legitimate and overseen by legitimate civil bodies;
- are committed to observing standards and principles pertaining to the rule of law and human rights;
- demonstrably apply transparent and efficient processes.

The fundamental principles of good governance also aim to prevent the bodies in the security sector from becoming a threat to their own population.
To be able to effectively assert their mandates, the institutions also require sufficient material, human and financial resources.
A large number of developing countries often lack both the underlying institutional conditions and the resources required to run an effective and efficient security sector. If these deficiencies lead to the security sector no longer being able to fulfil its core functions, then the country in question is likely to be a fragile state.

Reasons why DC is reluctant

Although it is obvious how important an effective and efficient security sector is to development policy, the matter was treated as a taboo among many donors for a long time because

- the clear human rights violations committed by security bodies in many countries were not in line with DC standards, thus posing a significant risk to donors' reputations;
- there is a fear that the trust of local civil society will be lost if parties involved in DC work with bodies from the security sector, who are often perceived to be part of the source of the problem;

- governments are wary about receiving advice from foreign organisations when it comes to reforms in the security sector;
- the majority of measures in the security sector are not eligible as Official Development Assistance (ODA).

Another factor affecting fragile states is that security bodies may be strengthened in certain circumstances and suddenly deployed against the population's interests where the constellations of power are unstable and often rapidly changing.

Approaches for international DC

Nevertheless, an increasing number of parties have begun speaking out in favour of development policy mechanisms as – at the very least – being a good opportunity for bringing about important reforms in the security sector and thus making sustainable development at all possible in the first place. This relates primarily to "no regret" measures, which are seen as sensible regardless of particular constellations of power. These are often geared towards the requirements of a model security sector, as described above. They include measures such as:

- Promoting democratic institutions and civil organisations to oversee security forces;
- Providing buildings and equipment for courts;
- Providing advice on democratic reforms in security bodies (rules and regulations, processes, training on standards and principles regarding human rights, etc.);
- Supporting the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants. ■