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Security Sector Reform in the Central African Republic

Chronicle of a Death Foretold

This paper looks into the implementation of SSR in CAR, the deficiencies of its design, and the missteps made in its implementation. Its central finding is that the failure of the peacebuilding process in CAR was predestined, stemming from the earliest stages of SSR implementation in the country.

Abstract:

In 2008, the Central African Republic (CAR) embarked on an innovative security sector reform (SSR) process – one that emphasized the need for a holistic approach and national ownership. Notwithstanding initial successes, SSR implementation soon stalled and was then effectively abandoned. After December 2012, CAR was confronted with a dramatic resurgence of armed violence, in which rebel groups from the Muslim north took control of the country's major cities and the country quickly imploded in a bloody civil war. This paper looks into the implementation of SSR in CAR, the deficiencies of its design, and the missteps made in its implementation. Its central finding is that the failure of the peacebuilding process in CAR was predestined, stemming from the earliest stages of SSR implementation in the country. In tacit complicity, national and international stakeholders have done little to prevent state collapse. Insufficient coordination, unrealistic expectations, and unsteady support on the part of the international community, combined with the inherent capacity weaknesses of a post-conflict state, have been recipes for state-building failure. To borrow the title of a novel from **Gabriel García Márquez**, "there had never been a death so foretold." A serious review of SSR efforts in CAR offers valuable lessons to the international community on how to design and implement post-conflict reconstruction more effectively in the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Historical and Political Background

The Central African Republic (CAR) is a semi-presidential republic that won its independence from France in 1960. Landlocked in the centre of the continent, it has a territory of 623,000 km, roughly that of France and Belgium combined, and a population composed of around 80 ethnic groups totalling 4.5 million. Roughly fifteen percent of the population lives in the capital Bangui.[1] Despite having to deal with autocracy, corruption and low intensity violence, CAR enjoyed a relatively peaceful history compared with many of its neighbours.[2] However, beginning in 1996, it was confronted with a succession of mutinies, coup attempts, protests, and strikes. As the security situation deteriorated,[3] an array of groups sought to arm themselves. There were also calls for foreign military support. Thousands of weapons flooded into CAR from neighbouring countries, also unstable. Destruction of property and pillaging were widespread.[4] The civilian population fell victim to the growing violence,[5] which was increasingly coloured by escalating ethnic tensions.

In 2003, CAR entered a new phase more favourable to peace, institutional reform, and development. President François Bozizé, who initially took power as an army general in a successful *coup d'état,* won successive elections in 2005 and 2011. His government enjoyed the support of most civil society groups and political parties. The life of Bangui citizens improved considerably; street banditry became less frequent and violence decreased in the country as a whole. The main rebel groups declared their preparedness to participate in wide-ranging disarmament. Billed as an Inclusive Political Dialogue, this process set a mutually agreed timeline for a national effort to press for the country's stabilization. In its wake, the government's development strategy started to emphasize security sector reform (SSR), good governance, economic rehabilitation, and human capital development – and donors slowly began to re-engage with the country.

Security Sector Reform in CAR: A Model Case?

Beginning in October 2007, during a donor conference held in Brussels, the CAR government pledged to implement a wide-ranging SSR process and called on the international community to support its efforts. This was followed by a national seminar on SSR in April 2008. Some 200 national and foreign participants gathered for three days in the CAR capital Bangui to assess the country's security sector and set out a timetable outlining

concrete steps for SSR implementation. The seminar methodology privileged inclusiveness and national ownership in the elaboration of the SSR programme.[6] Inspired by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) *Handbook on Security System Reform* principles,[7] the seminar identified five principles to guide SSR formulation and implementation:

- CAR's security sector has to be approached globally, with no sub-sectors off-limits;

- SSR needs to be based on strong national ownership, as it is a process that has to be nationally designed, led, and financed (at least in the early phases of reform);

- the political engagement of the government in this process is essential;

- SSR requires effective democratic oversight, in which parliament plays a crucial role;

- civil society is an essential actor in the democratic governance of security and must therefore be involved in SSR.[8]

The seminar mapped the security sector and identified five "*vertical pillars*" that needed to be addressed by the reform process, which were then subject to a far-reaching review:

- defence (armed forces and gendarmerie);

- national police and paramilitary forces (municipal police, customs service, environmental guard);

- judicial and penitentiary administration;

- political, economic and financial governance;

- intelligence services.

The analysis was further enriched by a set of "*transversal themes*" considered essential for CAR's democratic stabilization and the rule of law:

- democratic oversight ensured by parliament;

- transparency in budget management and the fight against corruption;

- public oversight by media and civil society, as well as the gender dimension of reforms;

- the relation between SSR and DDR (disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration) and the struggle to control small arms proliferation;

- the presence of foreign combatants on CAR's territory.

The analysis concluded with the identification of 146 activities that CAR needed to undertake. Some of them were short term, requiring relatively

few resources and being potentially realizable within eight to nine months. Others were considered medium term, demanding greater financial and technical resources and depending on international support for their realization. The 146 activities were organized in a formal document called the *SSR Chronogram*, with six CAR ministries tasked to implement different sections of the Chronogram.[9] Then President Bozizé committed his government to its implementation, calling it "not only a working plan, but a veritable bible to guide government's day to day actions."[10] The establishment of a comprehensive planning document laying out clearly the key activities, responsibilities and timelines of the reform process probably constituted a unique approach towards SSR in a post-conflict state.

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SSR Objectives in CAR

The complexity of the Chronogram illustrates the fact that a holistic SSR approach, as recommended in the OECD-DAC Handbook, constitutes for all intents and purposes the equivalent of state-building.

In CAR, this approach encompassed four overriding objectives. First, there was the imperative to create a **normative framework** supporting the development of professional security services and their efficient administration. In CAR, numerous areas needed new legislation or updated regulations: military planning, decentralization, the legal status of national police, the creation of a municipal police, the organization of the intelligence services, the penal code, the status of prison personnel, the possession and circulation of small arms, self-defence groups, illegal migration, the protection of classified information, the codes governing the extraction of resources from forests and mines, public accountancy, and so on.

A second objective was to improve the capacity of the **human resources in CAR's security sector**. This involved multi-ethnic recruitment of the security forces, the creation of a Human Resources Unit in the Ministry of Defence, the establishment of a civilian corps of prison guards, the drafting of codes of conduct for the individual security forces, and the training of a variety of national stakeholders.

A third priority was to improve **infrastructure and equipment**. This was to be achieved through activities such as building new military caserns, a military hospital, police stations, and prisons; refurbishing existing police stations and prisons; equipping the largely unarmed and underequipped

police with the weapons, communications, and transport capacities required to perform their roles, as well as providing the security forces with new uniforms.

The final objective focused on enhancing **human security**. In CAR, this was to be done through a range of immediate administrative actions, such as dismantling illegal checkpoints, appointing prefects and sub-prefects in the provinces, increasing the deployments of security forces in the countryside, and adopting regulations that would make it illegal for soldiers to carry weapons in bars and markets.

At the core of CAR's ambitious SSR plan was the hypothesis that a simultaneous effort invested in all the components of the security sector would create synergies that would accelerate and consolidate the overall reform process. However, the human and financial requirements of the comprehensive reform process embodied in the Chronogram – and indeed the OECD-DAC Handbook that inspired it – were enormous.

The Challenges of SSR Implementation in CAR

SSR as a high political process

Initially, there was enthusiastic support for the implementation of the SSR Chronogram. By the end of 2009, 70 percent of the plan had been put into effect, even though reforms advanced at different speeds in different sectors. The European Commission (EC) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also provided support through the deployment of a multidisciplinary team that worked alongside ministries responsible for SSR. Technical advice and access to international good practices were provided to local stakeholders in order to support their efforts to assess the needs and priorities of institutional reforms, draft laws and develop strategic documents, administrative decisions, and codes of conduct. The international presence brought about a slow but steady improvement in attitudes, awareness, and national capacity on the part of local actors.

However, the SSR process soon stalled. By the beginning of 2010, the reform process was largely limited to the execution of a few technical projects. A lack of political will largely explains this lack of sustainability. In their public discourse, CAR's political leaders affirmed a strong commitment to democratization and SSR. Yet there was a natural resistance to reforms at the political level. The CAR government proved particularly resistant to any reforms that would diminish its control over resources. Administrative decisions and legislation capable of challenging

the balance of power were often blocked by endless drafting procedures and dysfunctional working groups. The country's lack of budgetary transparency and accountability has traditionally stymied efforts to institute qualitative improvements in governance. President Bozizé personally controlled the distribution of the state budget. At the same time, his government was unable to mobilize the financial resources necessary for its functioning. Much of the funding needed for daily administration, salaries, and reforms was provided by the international community,[11] whose control over the resources was only partial and whose support was eventually withdrawn.

CAR's cultural background and political traditions encourage the overwhelming concentration of power in the executive. A correction of this imbalance, essential for democratic governance, is not always considered necessary by local stakeholders. There was resistance to reforms aiming to empower the parliament; this existed not only within the executive and security sector but even in parliament itself, notwithstanding its poor institutional record and low performance standards. Beyond that, CAR's social structure and political system tend to rely on invisible networks of influence that privilege immediate individual or group interests at the expense of long term, strategic national priorities.

> The international community must either summon the substantial political will and resources required to support SSR, or it must acknowledge that the holistic SSR model has failed in practice, in which case it would need to revise its theoretical and political approach accordingly.

SSR and the need for substantial international support

In a post-conflict state such as CAR, it is essential that the international community conduct a thorough assessment of what is realistically viable – psychologically, financially, operationally and logistically – in planning for SSR. The international community must either summon the substantial political will and resources required to support SSR, or it must acknowledge that the holistic SSR model has failed in practice, in which case it would need to revise its theoretical and political approach accordingly.

Initially, international partners accompanied local authorities through every step of the SSR process. Acknowledging the lack of sufficient local technical capacity, the EC, UNDP, and individual countries, particularly Belgium and France, provided technical support for the SSR process. As a result, a significant number of Central Africans, both civilian and military, were exposed to a reform process that reshaped their perception of democratic governance and civil-military relations. SSR was thus primarily a vehicle for diffusing norms about democratic governance and human

rights and the values underpinning them - a fundamental requirement for a sustainable reform process.

At the same time, the SSR process remained largely a nationally financed process, in which international assistance was mostly limited to technical expertise. Financial assistance was punctual, provided by various international actors supporting different sectoral projects, and not necessarily those figuring into the Chronogram.[12] Perhaps decisively, insufficient effort was invested into clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the various national and international actors involved in the SSR process, and establishing a division of labour among them.[13]

Traditionally, CAR had received little international attention and minimal financial assistance. Then, a few large and extremely costly projects, aimed at supporting elections and DDR, raised expectations that substantial financial support for SSR was forthcoming. But two donor conferences dedicated to raising funds for SSR, organized in 2009 and 2010, failed to generate sufficient international funding for the implementation of the more expensive, medium term activities envisaged by the national SSR seminar. This seriously called into question the international community's dedication to the reform process.

As of 2011, international assistance to CAR was refocused on supporting free and fair national elections; everything else became a secondary objective of the peace consolidation effort. This gave the impression that external actors saw the electoral process as providing them with a politically acceptable exit strategy. Local stakeholders initially had high expectations when the SSR process was launched in 2008-2009. Once the short term Chronogram activities were carried out, they expected international donors to undertake the costly rehabilitation and infrastructure projects foreseen by the SSR seminar. This did not happen.

The lack of continuity in the international engagement generated local frustration and disappointment. Individuals involved in the reform process felt abandoned after yet another "experimental project" sponsored by western donors. Unfortunately, local actors often lacked the capacity to publicize their accomplishments in the reform process, which in turn had an impact on the perception of international actors. The latter tended to be overly critical of local efforts and often failed to take into account cultural differences and the constraints imposed on local actors. This resulted in inflated expectations, unrealistic programming, and unfavourable evaluations of local performance.

The prospects for holistic SSR in a failed state

How did it happen that such a holistic SSR approach was even adopted for a fragile state like CAR? Despite the involvement of the international community in the 2008-2010 period, CAR's basic circumstances scarcely changed. The Failed States Index[14] consistently placed CAR among the top ten countries most vulnerable to collapse or conflict – the most visible signs of this vulnerability being its inability to control its territory and meet the basic needs (security and otherwise) of its citizens. Public administration has remained concentrated in the few urban agglomerations, mainly in Bangui, while the role of the state in many prefectures continues to be largely symbolic. Limited access to education has meant that the country's human resources continue to be under-utilised, thereby limiting the number of competent local actors capable of effectively supporting SSR.

Due to its geopolitical location and unprotected borders, CAR is almost constantly under threat of conflict spillover from neighbouring Sudan, South Sudan, Chad, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a result, large parts of CAR are in a state of low intensity conflict with an ever-present risk of major confrontation.

The state of the security sector is critical. During 2008-2010, when SSR was implemented, CAR had only around 10,000 military, paramilitary, and personnel with special status in its security forces. The violent period between the 1996 mutinies and the 2003 *coup d'état* triggered the collapse of the army as a viable institution, leading to the destruction of much of its infrastructure. Operational capacity was undermined by a lack of unity and discipline, and a dysfunctional approach to training. Owing to logistical, equipment and operational shortcomings, the armed forces have been sorely limited in their ability to deploy outside the capital. In a country about the size of Texas, only 1,000 troops were capable of deploying in the countryside on a permanent basis.[15]

Moreover, the country's security forces have tended to be lightly armed, frequently outgunned by rebel groups and highway bandits. The police-population ratio remains at the appalling level of 1 to 2,647, placing CAR in last place in the region. The national police force counts some 1,700 officers, 800 of whom are located outside the capital and suffer from being severely under-equipped and burdened with an ill-defined and widely disrespected chain of command. Months of salary arrears and the lack of a pension scheme undermine the police's morale and self-image, resulting in a force prone to corruption, regularly involved in petty harassment of the population and often guilty of human rights violations.[16]

State fragility and under-development have reinforced one another in CAR. Landlocked between countries in conflict, CAR's low population density, abysmal transportation system, underdeveloped infrastructure, and largely unskilled work force, plus a legacy of misdirected macroeconomic policies, have all acted as serious constraints on its economic development. As a result, CAR has suffered a huge decline in living standards since independence. With about 70 percent of its citizens living below the poverty line, CAR is among the poorest countries in the world, ranking 180 out of 187 countries on the 2012 Human Development Index.[17] The 2013 Ibrahim Index of African Governance gave CAR an overall score of 32.7 out of 100 possible points, placing it 49th out of 53 African countries.[18]

Perhaps the weakest link in SSR implementation has been the insufficient conceptual and institutional connection with DDR. Notwithstanding the recognition of the intimate link between the two, DDR and SSR have developed independently and without effective coordination.

A constant feature of Central African political life has been the organization of opposition movements into military rebel groups. The rebel leaders tend to be former politicians or military officers, often having held important positions (minister, presidential advisor, chief of staff) within the very regime they had taken up arms against. Rebel groups ostensibly seeking to overthrow the regime usually have no political platform or alternative vision for the country's future – and instead seek to gain leverage in negotiations over new positions within the existing power structure. Subsequent peace negotiations have often entailed amnesty laws creating a climate of impunity and a widespread lack of confidence in the state's capacity to provide justice and rule of law.

Perhaps the weakest link in SSR implementation has been the insufficient conceptual and institutional connection with DDR. Notwithstanding the recognition of the intimate link between the two, DDR and SSR have developed independently and without effective coordination. Since 2003, several DDR programmes have been implemented with disappointing results, bringing no significant increase in human security and failing to either integrate ex-combatants into security forces or reinsert them in local communities.[19] Different donors, sponsors, and managers of DDR programs (e.g., UNDP, EC, CEMAC [Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa], World Bank) have failed to coordinate their efforts and integrate their budgets.

Descent into Chaos

In December of 2012, the Seleka movement – a loose coalition of old and new rebel groups – started a march from the north-east of the country

towards Bangui and soon controlled over a third of its territory. By March 2013, Bangui had fallen and President Bozizé had fled abroad.

But his Seleka successor Michel Djotodia soon lost control of the movement he nominally headed. This was followed by large scale violence, looting, summary executions, arbitrary arrests, and other human rights violations, sometimes perpetuated by child soldiers. Through all this, there have been major population displacement and ethnic murder on a mass scale. The predominantly-Muslim Seleka was opposed by largely ad hoc constituted Christian self-defence groups, some of which supported former president Bozizé. The violence has gradually morphed into a sectarian conflict, notwithstanding CAR's long history of inter-confessional coexistence. Regular and rebel forces from neighbouring countries have also been reported to be involved in large numbers.

As we write, national and international actors seem to have understood the stakes. An interim CAR president has been appointed to lead the country through a stabilization process leading up to national elections in 2015. A former mayor of Bangui, Madame Catherine Samba-Panza is the first female CAR president and only the third female leader to hold this position in Africa. Criticizing the political establishment for its role in the country's ruin, she has announced a new technocrat government composed of 20 members, seven of whom are women. The continuing conflict among armed groups and the ongoing killings following her inauguration suggest that a determined effort to reconcile CAR's people will be necessary if the new political leadership is to gain acceptance and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Following the violent collapse of their country in 2013, the Central Africans now have to pick up the pieces. Once stability has been restored, they will need to re-launch the state-building process. As in the past, SSR will be an essential component. Whether and how the international community will be CAR's partner in this process remains to be seen.

The SSR programme implemented by CAR's government in 2008-2010 was a mirror image of the holistic approach developed by the OECD-DAC; in other words, a "systems" oriented approach aiming to reinforce the security forces, enhance their professionalization, and strengthen democratic governance mechanisms. A very ambitious project of societal and national transformation, it demanded a stable security environment and considerable human and financial resources – neither of which was available in CAR.

The experience of the international community in CAR raises a number of red flags for the international community. Is its SSR concept faulty, requiring adjustment? Are international donors really prepared to come up with the considerable resources required to nurture a well-governed and efficient security sector? SSR success may require a revision of the SSR concept and a recommitment by donors. For years to come, CAR will remain a learning field for national and international leaders committed to bringing profoundly wounded post-conflict societies back from the brink. SSR requires a long term perspective, strategic patience, as well as ample and well-invested resources. This is all very challenging. That said, if the CARs of the world fail, the costs to the country, the region, and the international community are bound to be immeasurably greater and more painful.

About the SSR 2.0 Briefs

The *SSR 2.0 Briefs* are intended to advance second-generation approaches to SSR that seek to overcome the challenges and deficiencies encountered by orthodox SSR approaches, as defined by key documents like the OECD DAC Handbook. The series offers a venue to present new ideas, approaches, and strategies. Authors are encouraged to adopt innovative positions and break new ground in their briefs.

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The Centre for Security Governance (CSG) is a non-profit, non-partisan think tank dedicated to the study of security transitions in fragile, failed and conflict-affected states, a process also known as security sector reform (SSR). A registered charity based in Kitchener, Canada, the CSG maintains a global network of research fellows from a variety of backgrounds, including practitioners, research analysts and academics, and partner organizations from the public and private sector engaged in SSR issues.

Notes

1. See *CIA World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ct.html.

2. Eric G. Berman and Louisa N. Lombard, *The Central African Republic and Small Arms. A Regional Tinderbox* (Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, 2008), p. 27.

3. The violence surrounding the military mutinies in 1996-1997 was stopped only by the intervention of the French army, followed by that of foreign militaries from Mali, Senegal, and Chad.

4. Zacharie Gounoumoundjou, *Histoire de la Démocratie en Republique Centrafricaine. Des origines au coup d'état du 15 mars 2003* (Bangui, 2005), pp. 14-20.

5. An attempted coup in 2001 brought hundreds of Congolese soldiers from the MLC (*Mouvement de Libération du Congo*) into CAR's capital Bangui. This rebel group was headed by Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo, presently under trial at the International Criminal Court for "crimes against humanity" directed against CAR's civilian population from 2001 to 2003. See *Decision Pursuant to Article 61(7)(a) and (b) of the Rome Statute on the Charges of the Prosecutor Against Jean-Pierre Bemba Gombo, 15 June 2009,* Public Documents, International Criminal Court, http://www.icc-cpi.int/iccdocs/doc/doc699541.pdf.

6. For a detailed analysis of the SSR policy formulation phase in CAR, see Niagalé Bagayoko-Penone, *Multi-level Governance and Security: the Security Sector Reform Process in the Central African Republic* (European University Institute Florence, RSCAS 2010/47), pp. 5-10.

7. OECD-DAC, *Handbook on Security System Reform: Supporting Security and Justice* (Paris: OECD, 2007), http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/43/25/38406485.pdf.

8. *Rapport final du comité préparatoire. Séminaire sur la Réforme du Système de la Sécurité en République Centrafricaine*, Ministry of Defence, CAR, Bangui, April 2008.

9. Defence, Interior, Justice, Waters and Forests, Finance, and the General Secretariat of Government (for the Parliament).

10. *Rapport final du comité préparatoire. Séminaire sur la Réforme du Système de la Sécurité en République Centrafricaine*, Ministry of National Defence, RCA, Bangui, April 2008, Annex 18, p. 144.

11. Roughly 35 percent of annual budget revenues came from foreign aid in 2008-2010.

12. This lack of coordination and engagement towards a holistic SSR project in CAR was obvious during the Donor Conference held in Bangui on October 29, 2009, when no SSR project proposed by local stakeholders received the donor support, unless it was overlapping on existing ongoing projects.

13. The lack of coordination and unclear division of labor within the international community is noted in several monitoring and evaluation reports. See Raport de Mission, "2eme Mission d'Evaluation Conjointe de la Reforme du Secteur de la Securite en Republique Centrafricaine entre le government et les partenaires techniques et financiers," 15 Novembre 2009, p. 74. See also "RSS Stratégie du Moyen Terme (2011-2013), Sous-secteur Contrôle democratique," BINUCA, January 2011, pp. 8-9.

14. *Failed States Index*, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/failed_states_index_2012_interactive.

15. Interviews, Bangui, 2009, 2010.

16. In 2008, the National Police was equiped with seven vehicles; unless in a special mission, police officers did not have any self-defence equipment except for whistles. Interviews, Bangui, 2009, 2010.

17. UNDP, *Statistics of the Human Development Report 2012*, http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/.

18. The Index assesses national progress against 84 criteria clustered in four main pillars: Safety and Rule of Law; Participation and Human Rights; Sustainable Economic Opportunity; and Human Development. See http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/en/section/the-ibrahim-index/scores-and-ranking.

19. Boubacar N'Diaye, "The Central African Republic," in Di*sarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration and Security Sector Reform* (Geneva: Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, LIT VERLAG, 2012), pp. 115-142.