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Parliaments, the security sector, and the Sustainable Development Goals: Lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic

Introduction

The global Covid-19 pandemic brought about a unique set of challenges and, as part of their initial response, many states included the use of the security sector to combat the pandemic through the enforcement of lockdown regulations. The domestic use of the security sector during crises, notably the military and police services, brings about its own challenges such as the abuse of power and broader state securitisation and even militarisation. This was evident in several countries during the Covid-19 pandemic where the abuse of power by security forces resulted in assault and even the death of citizens. These actions clearly detract from the United Nation's [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDG\)](#), specifically SDG16 that calls for the establishment of peaceful, just, and inclusive societies and strong institutions. Parliaments, as institutions of accountability, offer a platform to address not only the responsible utilisation of the security sector, but also how security sector utilisation can be directed to contribute to SDG16.

This brief draws upon a commissioned research report from the [Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of the Armed Forces \(DCAF\)](#) authored by Wilhelm Janse van Rensburg (Parliament of South Africa), Nicolette van Zyl-Gous (Parliament of South Africa) and Lindy Heinecken (Stellenbosch University).

The functions of parliament and its contribution to security sector governance and SDG16

Parliaments' five key roles refer to its legislative, oversight, representative, budgetary and elective functions. Several of these functions overlap with the generally accepted focus areas of good security sector governance (SSG). For example, good SSG includes a focus on transparency, accountability, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness, and the maintenance of the rule of law within the security sector. The parliamentary functions and good SSG principles, in turn, link directly to several [SDG16](#) targets. SDG16.6 focuses on the need to develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels. SDG16.3 calls for the promotion of the rule of law while SDG16.10 aims to

ensure public access to information and the protection of fundamental freedoms. SDG16.7 further espouses to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels. By linking parliamentary functions, good SSG and SDG16, it becomes evident that when parliaments execute their functions effectively, they can contribute to an environment characterised by good SSG allowing for the security sector to contribute directly to SDG16.

When used effectively, the security sector can contribute meaningfully to SDG16. This is visible, for instance, in international military peacekeeping missions that aid directly in achieving SDG16.1 (reducing violence), SDG16.3 (contributes to the rule of law) and SDG16A (preventing violence and combating terrorism and crime). Similarly, police action has the potential to contribute to the achievement of SDG16, specifically if the principles of democratic policing are upheld. Given the centrality of the rule of law to SDG16, the functions of police services, as entities that maintain the rule of law, permeate all aspects of SDG16. The police are the entry point of the criminal justice system value chain and have a significant impact on the entire security sector's capacity to improve human security.

Parliaments and security sector utilisation during the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the potential contribution of the security sector to SDG16 in times of crises. For example, the South African National Defence Force was called in to support overburdened public healthcare facilities, assist with decontamination, distribution of food parcels, health screening and Covid-19 awareness education. In the Philippines, the military was employed in logistic and humanitarian capacities to transport protective equipment, medical equipment, testing kits and frontline personnel. In the UK, the Coronavirus Act, 2020, empowered the police to support public health services in the testing and treatment of individuals. More recently, the positive role of the military was also demonstrated in, for example, Zimbabwe where military personnel were incorporated to assist with vaccination drives.

Despite these positive contributions, the Covid-19 pandemic also demonstrated how security sector utilisation can detract from SDG16 by undermining peace, security, and the rule of law. This was evident mostly in cases where the security sector was used to enforce lockdown regulations. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights raised concern around measures used to enforce lockdown regulations and curfews as being highly militarised in several countries, resulting in widespread abuses. In South Africa, for example, a citizen was killed by soldiers and members of the local municipal law enforcement department in Johannesburg two weeks after the lockdown came into effect.

In most democratic states, parliaments play a key role in overseeing security sector utilisation. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, many states relied on secondary legislation, which often do not fall within the oversight ambit of parliaments, thus circumventing the processes of parliamentary oversight. For example, to manage the Covid-19 pandemic, South Africa implemented a state of disaster which did not require parliamentary approval. The unprecedented nature of global lockdowns also resulted in practical challenges to parliaments, such as the temporary suspension of parliamentary activity and the need to shift to remote operations. Parliaments were therefore ill-prepared to oversee security sector utilisation during the initial stages of the pandemic when such oversight was most needed to address abuses and direct deployments towards constructive contributions.

Conclusion: Lessons for parliaments from the Covid-19 pandemic around security sector governance

As parliaments recovered their functionality following the initial outbreak of the pandemic, it became evident that these institutions face significant shortfalls during emergencies, specifically in terms of

oversight of the security sector. As such, several lessons can be drawn from parliaments around the world as to how oversight of the security sector can be improved in general and during emergencies in particular. These lessons are also key in enabling parliaments to be drivers of SDG16 outcomes as it pertains to the security sector.

In terms of its legislative role, parliaments should ensure that clear legislation is in place that guides oversight of domestic military deployments, specifically during emergencies or crises. Legislation should also be reviewed to guarantee that secondary legislation cannot be used to circumvent parliamentary oversight. Linked to the legislative process is parliament's budgetary function which also requires special attention during emergencies. Parliaments should remain capable of approving or disapproving emergency allocations. Where the emergency utilisation of the security sector takes place, budgetary allocations should include the provision of funds for Ombuds institutions or other independent investigating authorities that will address security sector misconduct and misuse of public funds. Parliaments, as representative institutions, should further ensure that it remains operational, even during emergencies. Prompt oversight of emergency deployments of the security sector should remain possible and the adoption of virtual parliamentary sittings during Covid-19 showcased a means to achieve continued oversight.

In relation to parliaments' oversight function, the widespread use of the security sector during the pandemic highlights the need for broader oversight of the sector as a whole and not merely a silo-approach to oversight of the various sub-sections of the security sector. Continued oversight of the security sector utilisation should also be aligned with the outcomes of SDG16 and parliaments can play a role in directing the sector's contribution to these goals. Key to this is the need to ensure parliamentary transparency and easy access to parliamentary discussions around the security sector.

Recommended for further reading.

This brief is based on commissioned research completed for the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) published in February 2022.

The full article can be accessed: <https://dcaf.ch/parliaments-contributions-ssgr-and-sdgs>

A podcast discussion on the research can be accessed <https://anchor.fm/dcaf/episodes/SDG-16--Security-Sector-Governance-and-the-Role-of-Parliaments-in-Times-of-Crisis-e1eis2d>

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