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# SSR and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Armed wing of state-building?

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## Introduction

This paper directly challenges some of the popular SSR mythology that has grown around the UK's involvement in Sierra Leone and the subsequent policy developments associated with SSR. It raises questions about the underlying political assumptions of the SSR process and contemporary SSR material, much of which lacks analysis of underlying theories of SSR relating to broader state building and construction of a liberal peace.

Using a case taken from the reconstruction of Sierra Leone this paper outlines some of the key issues emerging after ten years of reconstruction efforts. Sierra Leone is usually over-cited, but given its importance to any orthodoxy that may be said to exist, it is relevant here. Fundamentally, Sierra Leone remains a relatively small state in West Africa and the fact a viable state remains elusive challenges assumptions about time taken in reconstructing socio-political norms and structures, and also questions state-building as a post conflict approach.

This paper will argue that SSR in Sierra Leone was never a developed strategy but came to represent a series of policies that evolved on the ground largely as the result of the interaction of individuals and groups engaged in those early decisions, sometimes against the wishes of Whitehall, but always sharing a 'direction of travel'. This is an important point in terms of how SSR policy was actually developed and also how approaches come to be seen as being far smoother and well planned with hindsight but also in terms of how policy-makers and academics can learn about social, governance and security processes.

Finally the paper moves on to analyse what lessons can and can't be drawn from this experience and what the implications are for SSR going forward. It argues that the example of Sierra Leone as a 'classic' post conflict situation is enlightening but also damaging in the sense that any future SSR intervention will face radically different circumstances and needs to take into account broader issues of state-building and in particular recognising the deeply political aspects of what is being done when an international agency engages in SSR.

## What is special about post-conflict states?

The study of post conflict states is blessed with a wide and varied lexicon of terms that overlap, contradict and confuse whilst trying to describe varying forms of collapse. Whether fragile, weak, collapsed or neo-patrimonial, these dysfunctional states all suffer from vulnerability to external shocks, internal conflict, competing economic and political structures and an inability to exercise effective legal control within their borders. A post-conflict state exhibits all of these features but in extreme circumstances. What post-conflict SSR implies is a context in which there has been a serious conflict and this has come to an end. The state may have completely collapsed along with security and that there is a desire to reconstruct it.

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Engaging in SSR in post conflict environments poses special challenges but may also bring particular opportunities. Post conflict states are usually characterised by weak or non-existent states, fragile political situations that may continue to be violent, and an economic situation that is, at best, precarious. For a policy maker, a blank slate is attractive for reconstruction and for SSR. There is usually a local will to accept all forms of external support, even in sensitive areas like security, which may be lacking in countries not experiencing state collapse. This may, however, be complicated when the environment is not actually 'post conflict' at all as in Afghanistan and Iraq and where SSR is taking place under combat conditions.

It is often cited that the main difference between post conflict SSR and 'normal' SSR is that the post conflict version needs to deal with the legacy of past conflict [1]. However, this could be true of any post authoritarian state, however this is defined. Rather, the main distinguishing features of post conflict environments are usually the need to provide immediate security; the need to manage and DDR combatants; and the need to downsize security actors.

Overall, the chief characteristic of post conflict SSR is usually the level of influence of external actors in the process, including agencies, international militaries, private companies and non-statutory security actors, including insurgent groups, religious transnational actors and warlords. This is why post conflict SSR is so bound up with the broader process of state building. If security is one of the core functions of a state then we, as SSR practitioners, need to engage with what this general process means for what we are doing. I try to outline some of this in the following section.

**SSR and state-building**

As implied above, there is a strong link between SSR and state-building as a global project. In post conflict contexts this is also linked closely with the idea of the 'liberal peace'. Given the policy community's focus on states, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the main focus of international aid has been in trying to support states that are weak and also in reconstructing states that are in crisis or have collapsed entirely. There are clearly a set of clear reasons for this, not least is a concern with international security and the reliance on an international state system at international level that relies on functioning states to carry out basic tasks. The current international security environment also relies on states to maintain existing international order and thus the development of functioning security sectors within those states comes to the forefront of this agenda, something that is rarely mentioned in SSR literature.

Unsurprisingly state-building has become the main focus of much international aid, but unfortunately these attempts at state building have frequently been problematic. A core reason for

[1] Hainer Hanggi and Alan Bryden ((eds) (2005) *Security Governance in Post Conflict Peacebuilding*, Lit Verlag, Munster

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this is the methodology of state building. The vast majority of states that have been subject to these approaches have concentrated very much on technical issues – effectiveness, functionality – rather than on the idea of what a state actually is. A real issue in Africa and Central Asia in particular is what constitutes a state? There is a clear difference between constructing a state apparatus and building a real world state.

In Iraq the US attempted to construct a western style state armed with a whole range of neo-liberal state theories that view the institutions of the state as almost being separated from existing politics. It dismantled the state that existed and started all over again, constructing a new set of ahistorical institutions and alien to the local population. Holding an election does not necessarily constitute state formation, even though the assumption is that democracies can be created in this way within project horizons. Aside from the issues with multiparty democracy in a post conflict situation, the real issues with Iraq lie in a fundamental misunderstanding of what the project of state building actually means in practice.

A discussion of all of the burgeoning literature on state-building is beyond the scope of this paper but it is useful to look at representative illustrations of core approaches. Francis Fukuyama outlines a set of approaches posited on a completely ahistorical and technocratic view of states[2]. One of the initial points made by Fukuyama in his analysis concerns the lack of institutional memory within policy bodies such as the UN concerning state-building. This is complemented by the point that state building takes a long time – it is a long term commitment and requires sustained investment in time and resources.

Other analysts add to these ideas but many of these generalised comments don't really provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for state building. Hippler outlines a three point plan for state building based on[3]:

1) Improvement in living conditions.
2) Structural reform of functional ministries.
3) Integration of the political system.

Well, yes, but what does this actually mean in practice and integration of the political system into what? More importantly, if this means (as it usually does) integration of the political system into the international order, then who owns this process? Is this then a process that has some form of local ownership amongst those who are supposed to benefit or aimed at benefitting international states

[2] Francis Fukuyama, State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2004, and Francis Fukuyama, Nation-Building: Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP, 2006.
[3] Jochen Hippler, (ed) Nation-Building: A key Concept for Peaceful Conflict Transformation? London, Pluto Press, 2005

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relying on a state system? Presumably, all of this is done within a functioning security environment, a feature curiously missing from Hippler's analysis.

Whilst virtually all current analysts accept that there are issues with the nation-state in many of the contexts in which states are failing, there is still a tendency to accept the technocratic parameters of state building as laid out by Fukuyama. This casts the nation-state as the norm in international relations, whilst ignoring the broadening and deepening of security at international and subnational levels. There remains an assumption that if we can develop the right mixture of policies then we can create a healthy nation state that can exist in the international order, whilst in reality many of the states where nation-building is focussed are states only on paper.

Rebuilding them on paper does not mean that they exist in reality. Fundamentally all states rely on people to make them work and this means that they need to be political structures as well as institutional. The implications of this begin with people needing to buy in to the state at some level. Commonly related to ideas of legitimacy, there has to be some level of support for the state as an institution that represents something that they recognise as a state. In a liberal sense this is represented by multiparty democracy, but in reality this type of democratic structure may not deliver representation in this environment, partly because nascent democratic institutions take time to bed down. Somalia is the archetypal collapsed state but this is not simply a function of its own history but also a problem of contemporary international relations, particularly the universalisation of the nation-state[4].

This raises the second main point, namely that the construction of a new state requires a significant cultural change in terms of how people relate to that state as well as how people conduct everyday business. In Iraq, for example, the current attempts of the US to construct a western state, and their initial emphasis on deconstructing Saddam's state and political party, have effectively created an artificial layer of a state overlying subnational political systems and existing because the US supports it, not because there is an underlying support for the Iraqi nation state. This creates the risk that the new Iraqi state effectively becomes another faction rather than an oversight mechanism for controlling warring factions at subnational level.

Thirdly, state building is an extremely uneven within states. A core feature of the security system of Sierra Leone is that the UK supported a lot of technical support but the political support surrounding the security institutions was not supported to the same degree – mainly because it is difficult. Ten years of reform have effectively created an overdeveloped security force, including intelligence, but without the culture of civil oversight to control it.

[4] Wolfgang Heinrich and Manfred Kulessa, 'Deconstruction of States as an Opportunity for New Statism: The example of Somalia and Somaliland' in Hippler (ed) Nation-Building, 2005

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Fourthly, given the fact that state building is so resource intensive, it is also externally funded. This, in turn means that it is externally driven politically. This creates significant problems with regard to funding and funding priorities and particularly when considering local ownership – or lack of it – and the availability of funding affected by the financial crisis.

The development of SSR as a concept has been closely intertwined with the growth of state-building as a set of activities following a range of post Cold War collapses brought about by conflict. The processes involved in improving the capabilities of civil servants providing oversight in a Ministry of Defence cannot realistically be divorced from the development of civil service reform programmes as a whole, and security in general remains central to the entire state building approach, both from the point of view of individual citizens and also the international community, however that may be defined. Furthermore, SSR is an integral part of the international community's approach to conflict management. The reconstruction and reform of security institutions following conflict has become a central element of international intervention where '…relatively cheap investments in civilian security through police, judicial and rule of law reform … can greatly benefit long-term peacebuilding.'[5]

SSR seeks to improve the performance and accountability of police, military and intelligence organisations with the aim of improving the basic elements of security of the individual. SSR moves far beyond narrow technical definitions of security institutions and follows a more ambitious agenda of reconstructing or strengthening a state's ability to govern the security sector in a way that serves the population as a whole rather than a narrow political elite. This involves a radical restructuring of values and cultures within usually secretive and insular institutions. The process usually takes place in contexts where the general population is, mistrustful of security services and frequently hostile to organisations that may have been viewed as a direct threat to their own individual security. SSR is therefore an extremely ambitious set of approaches that cut to the very core of the functions of the state in relation to its citizens.

Despite the obvious difficulties with the political nature of these interventions, many international actors are currently involved in SSR programmes, including the UK, the UN, the US and the EU. These programmes employ an array of approaches and a complex mixture of international organisations, governments, non-state actors and private companies. Whilst there are significant differences between the US approach in employing Dyncorp to carry out 'SSR' in Liberia to the UN intervention in security and police reform in east Timor, there is a family resemblance in terms of the general approaches adopted.

[5] UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, A more secure world: Our shared responsibility, New York, UN, 2004. p.74.

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There has been much written about SSR but as mentioned above, it has been subject to what Peake, Scheye and Hills refer to as 'benign analytical neglect'[6]. This neglect is despite having been developed partly from an academic pre-history of civil-military relations. Whilst there has been a lot of writing on SSR it has tended to be very focussed on practical policy-related analysis rather than being rooted in conceptual or theoretical approaches[7]. As a result much of the work on SSR has been very specific and focussed on particular activities rather than looking at broader interventions as an expression of and in relation to broader social and economic reform[8]. In particular, specifics of case studies have been used as gateways into discussions surrounding security without really reflecting on broader implications.

**Sierra Leone as an example of policy development in the field**

Sierra Leone is one of the most cited examples of successful SSR programming, particularly in the context of post conflict interventions. Given this, the actual experience of Sierra Leone has been dominated by a popular mythology of what happened based on specific examples of intervention rather than an overview of what actually happened.

Whilst the immediate RUF threat to much of the country had dissipated by 2000 and disappeared by formal peace in 2002, the country was faced with a number of security challenges, including unstable borders, the lack of an overall security infrastructure and discredited security institutions. The conflict had also led to rapid urbanisation and displacement of the population with little prospect of economic betterment for large groups, particularly young men, many of whom needed to be demobilised. At Government level there was a powerful consensus for reconstruction of the country's security system that incorporated political figures, senior operational leaders, civil society and external actors. The stable commitment of the UK in particular as an external agent has meant that aid harmonisation has not been as problematic as it may have been with conflicting donor agendas.

The UK intervention itself can be divided into three main periods. The initial period, from 1997 to 2002, was characterised by the challenge of beginning a reform process in a conflict environment, subsiding into a ceasefire and then quickly reverting back to conflict. The second period, from 2002 to 2005, was largely concerned with consolidating early gains and spreading reform beyond

[6] Peake, G. Scheye, E. and Hills, A. 2008, Managing Insecurity: Field Experiences of Security Sector Reform, New York, Routledge

[7] See for example, Cawthra, G. and Luckham, R. (eds) (2003) Governing Insecurity: Democratic Control of Military and Security Establishments in Transitional Democracies, New York, Zed Books , Brzoska, M. (2003), Development Donors and the Concept of Security Sector Reform, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) Occasional Paper 4 and Hendrickson, D. and Karkoszka, A. (2002) 'The Challenges of Security Sector Reform' in the SIPRI Yearbook, Oxford, OUP

[8] See Hanggi and Bryden (eds) Security Governance.

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Freetown. The final period, to 2007, was a period of consolidation and development that culminated in the general elections of 2007 and encompassed a spreading of SSR activity beyond the l reconstruction of security services and in to a wider approach to the governance of the security and justice system.

**What possible lessons could be drawn from this experience?**

There are a number of core themes that have recurred over time and have importance for both the development of Sierra Leone itself, but also for the development of SSR more generally. This list does not claim to be exhaustive, but represents some of the conclusions drawn from recent research[9].

1. National ownership and engagement is critical. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of local ownership. Experience shows that it was the Sierra Leonean team that provided the continuity, with only a few external advisers remaining in country for substantial periods of time. Consistent political leadership and support was also present to drive through reforms. Good, capable and committed senior staff have been critical. It is incorrect to say that the whole process has been externally driven, even if elements have clearly been so and the question remains one of balance between local and external control.

2. The danger in maintaining a strong core group of leaders of the process is that once the support mechanisms are removed, then this group becomes extremely powerful. In addition, their removal removes much of the institutional memory of the reform process itself. This is a particular concern in a young democracy with few consolidated checks and balances. In practice, however, there may not be many alternatives to a core team.

3. Engaging civil society is valuable and was operationalised in various ways in Sierra Leone. The police and intelligence services have engaged civil society in a very decentralised fashion, whereas the army sought to improve public perceptions. Initial evidence from Sierra Leone shows that this has worked in the sense that generally people no longer feel threatened by security services, whereas before the transformation they certainly were.

4. By far the least developed element of oversight within is at the political, including parliamentary, level. Due to issues with and between Ministries and Ministers and the lack of functioning parliamentary structures, one of the key oversight mechanisms within the Government is the Office of National Security (ONS). The question remains, however: who monitors the ONS? In the longer term, the issue of ONS oversight may become politically

[9] Paul Jackson and Peter Albrecht, (2009) Security Transformation in Sierra Leone 1997-2007, GFN-SSR and DFID

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risky. Without proper parliamentary oversight and UK support, the security system may be hindered from developing into a truly democratically-led set of institutions.

5. Individuals have played an important role on developing SSR in Sierra Leone. This is at least in part a reaction to the lack of a coherent UK Government strategy, which drove a series of disagreements on the ground among UK officials. It is easy in hindsight to trace smooth policy developments, but, briefly much of the policy direction was enabled by the creation of joint funding pools in Whitehall and decision making of individuals on the ground who were empowered to take professional decisions and who needed to act relatively quickly. There was no overarching SSR strategy at the beginning, just a desire to reconstitute a state and security for the population.

6. Another significant aspect of UK collaboration was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1997, a long-term agreement between the two countries scheduled to last until 2012. Because UK engagement was primarily the result of a coalition of high-level British politicians who were committed to a country they felt could not be allowed to fall further into chaos, there was strong pressure on UK Ministries to work together on Sierra Leone. It should also be emphasised how atypical this is just in UK approaches alone, let alone in the whole donor community.

7. The issue of sustainability also leads to a clash between external actors and national owners of the process. It is inevitable that there will be differences between perceptions of what is or is not sustainable in the long run, as well as what operational capability is required or feasible. Like much of SSR this is due in part to questions of political balance and pragmatism and, at some level, of balancing realistic strategic planning with plans that amount to 'wish lists'. There may be hard decisions to be made about the form and function of defence and policing infrastructures, vehicles and equipment that will need strong leadership at the top. However, there must also be commitment from external donors to retrain and reconfigure security institutions that are fit for purpose, as opposed to mirrors of security systems in the donor country.

Sierra Leone's current situation is one where the population are undoubtedly better off the before or during the conflict, but the country remains at the bottom of the HDI. Consequently, there are real issues about who's security has actually been secured in broad terms if most of the local population still suffer from insecurity as a result of economic conditions, rising crime and lack of access to basic services. The UN and UK intervened over a long period of time and ten years of sustained investment and work have still left some aspects of SSR unfinished, particularly aspects of democratic accountability and civil oversight. I would argue that a core lesson to take from Sierra

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Leone is that a three or five year project cycle is not enough to change a political culture, certainly without other changes, such as the economy, remaining relatively static.

One of the remarkable features of the UK's intervention in Sierra Leone is how atypical it is. Effectively three Ministers got together and decided that this one country could not fall. They then crafted a MoU for ten years effectively providing not only a security guarantee but also a commitment to rebuild a state more or less from scratch. In fact, as DFID's own Evaluation Report of September 2008 points out, this MoU remained the *only* official document setting out DFID's strategic intentions between 2002 and 2007[10].

The threat of returning to some form of violent conflict remains, particularly in the countryside. In urban areas, public concern about street crime underscores the need to address the issue of youth unemployment. As in many countries, Sierra Leone is experiencing the issue of unemployed young men becoming the 'foot soldiers' of an increasing number of criminal gangs, particularly in the drug trade, and increasing the incidence of street crime. Given the weakness of Sierra Leone following the war, the development of gangs happened relatively rapidly and whilst security has improved, there is no way in which the total security system transformation process could be said to have been 'completed', even after ten years.

The importance of the justice sector remains an outstanding issue in Sierra Leone. It is clear that for most people in Sierra Leone justice is local; it involves a wide range of non-formal and semi-formal conflict resolution mechanisms, including village elders, religious figures and chiefs. However, reports from across Sierra Leone suggest that some of these mechanisms result in controversial land allocations, an extremely sensitive issue that was one of the social causes of the war. This is likely to remain an issue as long as the chiefs, elected for life by a limited suffrage, stand as custodians of the land. Justice reforms need to pay more attention to non-formal justice mechanisms, whilst at the same time encouraging an accessible legal system and rebalancing state building and SSR.

**Conclusion: External peacebuilding and the construction of agendas**

In some ways the experience of Sierra Leone represents the orthodox approach to SSR. However, in reality once the empirical evidence is analysed much of the contemporary orthodoxy of SSR begins to look more like a constructed mythology rather than a coherent theory. Moreover much of the theoretical work that has taken place in the field, although frequently excellent, has begun by

[10] Poate, D. Balogun, P. Rothmann, I., Knight, M. and Sesay, F. Evaluation of DFID Country Programmes: Sierra Leone, Evaluation Report EV690, DFID, 2008. It does point out that there are two informal documents that have informed strategic choices: the draft country strategy paper of 2002, and the Joint EC/DFID Country Strategy for Sierra Leone, drafted in 2006 but approved in January 2008.

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stating a definition of what SSR is (usually something that includes DDR; affordable and effective security bodies; and effective oversight mechanisms consistent with democratic norms) and then move on to look at *how* questions. Typical is Hanggi's approach in his introduction to conceptualising SSR where he states that: 'SSR is essentially aimed at the efficient and effective provision of state and human security within a framework of democratic governance'[11].

Many of the technical and downstream elements that follow on from this statement are very eloquently laid out but what is missing more generally in the SSR discourse is the upstream view, i.e. what does it mean to say 'democratic governance'? This is critical to the analysis of SSR and particularly in post conflict states where peace may be fragile and where the reconstitution of a state is problematic. An absence of what this really means represents a view of intervention as being technical and therefore void of political implications. This has an impact overall in terms of the introduction of particular types of states, but also in terms of how individuals relate to the security architecture on the ground.

An issue here is that post conflict environments are exaggerations of failed states in that they exhibit similar characteristics but they are even less constrained by institutional frameworks. This also means that post conflict states are even less able to oppose any forms of external interventions due to weak bargaining positions. This question of sovereignty is again rarely raised in relation to SSR but it is beginning to find a voice through work on local ownership that is starting to have an impact. However, the big questions here are who has legitimacy, ownership of what and can they actually exercise ownership? A sub-question is clearly whether or not donors are interested in local ownership who needs the security produced by SSR?

One narrative that needs to be interrogated here is the clear change in policy that followed the early 1990s involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo where the Cold War values of protecting the self-government of states were replaced by interventionism. However, this has again subtly changed to the Responsibility to Protect. Chandler posits the view that this encompassed a three dimensional approach to sovereignty that encompassed firstly a capacity to protect; secondly, a duty rather than a freedom; and thirdly, using legal agreements to repackage external regulation by the international community as 'partnership'[12]. In SSR terms, this would translate as framing support for sovereignty by boosting capacity whilst simultaneously undermining self-government; legitimation of external regulation; and, forming partnerships in which one side makes all of the decisions and holds the power.

This particular view may be just one perspective, but in SSR terms it does have implications in terms of accountability. What I mean by this is that reconceptualising sovereignty in this way allows

[11] Hanggi and Bryden, Security Governance
[12] David Chandler (2006) Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building, Pluto Press, London

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international donors to mask their own responsibility for policy outcomes, evade accountability and camouflage invasive intervention as 'empowerment' and capacity building.

So far so good, but even critics of the liberal peace approach, and by implication the orthodox approach to SSR, concede that what is really required is a rebalancing of external regulation and internal voice that could lead to an effective state that is locally accountable. In other words, criticising the liberal state and SSR should not lead to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The current set of issues that we are discussing here relating to the future of SSR is an opportunity to move forward as well as an opportunity to criticise past or current practice. However, this may require a number of key things to happen.

Firstly, policy makers and academics have to take a broader approach to the nature of conflict and particularly SSR. It is inadequate to stick to the same technical descriptions of SSR and confine the discussion of 'politics' to obstacles to achieving technical aims. This debate needs to be widened out to encompass the politics of what it means to carry our SSR and, by extension, what it means to construct a liberal state.

Secondly, there also needs to be a refocusing of analysis away from the primacy of external solutions to internal problems towards acknowledging external causes and internally generated solutions to local problems.

Thirdly, this also means that SSR must be more bound up with local definitions of security, as opposed to just taking universal definitions of human security that are linked to western ideas of what security actually is. This implies much more recognition of subjective, local definitions of security, but also raises the danger of just relying on 'traditional' justice systems. Traditional systems may be accessible, easily understood and present, but there are three core problems with just taking existing justice and security systems as being effective: firstly, in a post conflict situation there is a good case for arguing that they cannot have been that effective if they contributed to the war in the first place; secondly, there are legitimacy issues related to exactly how 'traditional' some of the actually systems are; and, thirdly, under traditional systems some parts of society may have been systematically excluded, usually women and young people. This is not the place to have a complete discussion about traditional systems, but a post conflict environment must take into account the reconstruction of local security networks without replicating systematic problems that contributed to conflict in the first place.

Lastly, a critical concern of any involvement in state-building or post conflict SSR has to be based on a thorough understanding of the relations of power and forms of violence. Any reform programme needs to understand the specifics of violence and to focus on history, anthropology and politics of violence in order to reconstruct meaningful security. Currently too much of the focus is on technical models, both in academic terms through discussions of 'elegant' mathematical modelling

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and in policy terms through technical solutions to constructing security institutions based on unwritten political assumptions. What this means is that there is a gulf between aspirations and actuality that is particularly wide in a post conflict environment and which can only be addressed when the politics of what we are doing are recognised.