Security and justice
Towards politically informed programming

Security and justice assistance is inherently political. Security and justice are core functions of the state. They affect power distribution and state-society relations, and involve multi-layered power relations among a range of providers operating at different levels. Donor programmes tend to adopt technical approaches focused on strengthening the capacity of state institutions, yet evidence that this improves citizens' experiences of security and justice is limited. The importance of a politically nuanced approach to security and justice programming is widely recognised, but a mismatch between policy and practice remains.

Security and justice are key development issues because they are priorities for poor people. They are associated with development outcomes, including the prevention of conflict, accountable and effective states, and economic growth.

This brief is based on a review of the academic and grey literature on security and justice provision, the detailed findings of which are set out in a DLP 'State of the Art' Paper (Bakrania, 2014). The review examined the current state of knowledge on how politics and power affect security and justice programming, and vice versa, and how donors can provide assistance in this sector that is more politically informed.

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Evidence gaps

The evidence base for security and justice programming is weak; there is little empirical evidence about what works. There are specific evidence gaps on:

- the role of leadership in security and justice programming;

- donor engagement with legal pluralism and multiple actors, and what forms of engagement benefit citizens;

- how to coordinate security and justice programming with other areas of assistance that might affect the development of institutions;

- how the security and justice sector can learn from approaches in other sectors to working politically.

The political nature of security and justice

There is a consensus in the literature that security and justice programming is inherently political. The literature suggests that:

- security and justice are core functions of the state, central to state-society relations, and are deeply political and contested;

- security and justice provision is multi-layered, involving a range of providers working at different levels, from the national state level to the local community level;

- how decisions are made and who controls those processes affects the extent to which security and justice services respond to citizens' needs – and to which citizens' needs; in many fragile and conflict-affected states, nepotism, patronage and corruption exclude segments of the population and hinder inclusive decision-making.

Principles for politically nuanced programming

The literature suggests principles to help donors work politically. These focus on considering tensions between the interests of elites and citizens, and integrating political dynamics into programme design. Specific proposals include:

- understanding local politics and power relations – including among service providers and between providers and citizens – such as by using gender and conflict analysis;

- engaging with elites in a negotiated partnership rather than a hierarchical relationship, and discussing how to reconcile international norms (such as human rights principles) with local norms;

- increasing the likelihood of support from elites by ensuring that programming appeals to their interests – for example, by enabling them to claim credit for positive change or to boost their international reputations;

- ensuring that support for state and non-state actors is linked, while being aware of the political role that donors play when encouraging such links;

- ensuring that practitioners have the local knowledge and skills they need to be able to work politically, including language skills and the ability to track power shifts;

- using pragmatic, flexible and gradual approaches that are rooted in local political realities;

- basing programmes on robust design, monitoring and evaluation, and updating theories of change as political conditions evolve.

"What hinders donors from working more politically in the security and justice sector?"

The 'policy-practice gap'

Most of these principles will be familiar. In particular, 'understanding the context', and 'realistic, flexible approaches' have been espoused in successive policy and academic documents. Donor policies acknowledge the importance of a politically nuanced approach to programming, but programmes remain overly technical. They also remain state-centric, tending to focus on national formal institutions. Support for non-state provision is often seen as merely a 'way in' to statebuilding based on western templates.

So what hinders donors from working more politically in the security and justice sector? There is little empirical evidence on which to base specific guidance.

But more fundamentally, perhaps, it is difficult to align programming with the context and promote domestic ownership when local, national and international norms differ. For example, security and justice programmes may seek to promote democratic and human rights principles in contexts where they are contentious. Is it possible for donors to reconcile the political and normative objectives of security and justice programming with local norms and traditions? And to what extent can donors foster local and domestic ownership in environments characterised by multiple 'owners', unstable politics, corruption and violence? Does the liberal political and state focus of donors and development agencies allow them to effectively engage with the multi-layered politics of partner countries?

These are complex tensions, which donor agencies seek to manage alongside other political pressures – including public opinion in their own countries, international security agendas, and organisational political economy dynamics.

Donors accept that changes are needed in their approaches to security and justice assistance. Whether they can respond to lessons learned from previous programming and apply a more political approach is not yet clear.