Civil Society, SDG 16, and Security Sector Governance: Promoting open government through strengthening access to information

Tunis, 16-17 March 2023

Workshop Report

About this Workshop

Within the framework of DCAF's SDG 16 project, DCAF hosted the workshop 'Civil Society, SDG 16, and Security Sector Governance: Promoting open government through strengthening access to information' on 16-17 March 2023, in Tunis, Tunisia. The workshop brought together representatives of Tunisian civil society organisations (CSOs) to discuss transparency and accountability in the context of the security sector and SDG target 16.10 on access to information and fundamental freedoms.

About DCAF's Project on SDG 16

This event took place as part of DCAF's SDG 16 project, which aims to position Security Sector Governance/Reform (SSG/R) as a policy tool at the national and international levels for the realization of SDG 16 on peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. The project focuses on three oversight actors – parliaments, civil society actors and ombuds institutions. It develops SDG 16-specific guidance that supports states in the implementation of SSG/R in the context of the 2030 Agenda. This project is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. More information can be found at: www.dcaf.ch/SDG16.

Workshop Overview

Within the framework of the project 'Linking Good Security Sector Governance and SDG 16', DCAF hosted in Tunis, Tunisia, on 16-17 March 2023, the workshop 'Civil Society, SDG 16, and Security Sector Governance: Promoting open government through strengthening access to information'. The workshop provided a platform for civil society representatives from Tunisia – including representatives from research organisations, local and national organisations working on civic engagement, good governance and monitoring, as well as investigative journalism – to examine how they can engage with state authorities to access information relevant to the security sector. The event included a one-day capacity building workshop for civil society and a multistakeholder conference with interventions from the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Tunisia and the National Authority on Access to Information.

SDG Target 16.10

As one of the targets of SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, target 16.10 calls for states to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements".

UNESCO defines the right of Access to Information (ATI) as "the right to seek, receive and impart information held by public bodies". It is an integral part of the fundamental right of freedom of expression, as recognized by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and was first acknowledged as an enabler for development in the Rio Declaration (1992).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises ATI as a precondition for ensuring transparent, accountable and participatory governance, rule of law and peaceful societies. In the context of good security sector governance, the right to access information is a key precondition for ensuring effective public oversight of institutions responsible for the management and provision of security.

Access to Information in Tunisia

Tunisia, as a member of the Open Government Partnership and the Pathfinders group, should work actively to promote transparent, participatory, inclusive and accountable governance and to accelerate action to implement SDG 16 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As an important partner in driving progress towards SDG 16, civil society should be actively involved in these efforts. To advance good security sector governance, it is crucial that civil society be provided with the information necessary to oversee the security sector. This aspiration is reflected both in the Open Government Partnership, and in SDG target 16.10 on access to information and fundamental freedoms. In Tunisia, the right to information (RTI) is embedded in Article 38 of the 2022 Tunisian Constitution, as well as in the Organic law n°2016-22 on Access to Information.

It is within the above context that DCAF held the workshop with the objectives of:

➢ Enhancing awareness of the links between security sector governance, SDG 16 and access to information;
➢ Enhancing understanding of transparency and accountability in the context of the security sector and SDG target 16.10;
➢ Providing participants with country-specific guidance on strategies and approaches to accessing information relevant to the security sector.

DCAF experts, together with the Dr. Sonja Stojanovic Gajic, former director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, and Charfeddine Yacoubi, President of Onshor, facilitated the workshop.

The workshop underscored that SDG target 16.10 lies at the heart of SDG 16 and is a key enabler of good security sector governance. Drawing on the experiences of civil society organisations (CSOs) working in Tunisia and elsewhere, it demonstrated that without public access to information, civil society will be unable to exercise oversight of the security sector, and with it, contribute to the realisation of transparent, accountable and effective security provision.

Workshop methodology

To implement the workshop, DCAF designed a workshop methodology that sought to integrate research into practice

and that used an interactive approach through learn-by-doing exercises, with the aim of assisting participants in analysing the current context and identifying relevant entry-points and commensurate strategies for accessing information and enhancing dialogue with states bodies and independent oversight bodies on the subject of ATI.

In addition, in preparation for the workshop, DCAF commissioned a stakeholder mapping to identify national and local-level CSOs working on access to information (ATI) in Tunisia; conducted an online survey to understand and capture the needs of CSOs in this area, and held a preparatory meeting with the several CSOs in February 2023 in Tunis to examine the results of the survey and tailor the workshop design accordingly.

CSOs and ATI: good practices from around the world

This report captures good practices by CSOs in the area of ATI identified during the workshop by participants and Dr. Sonja Stojanović Gajić, a leading expert on civil society and security sector governance/reform (SSG/R). These practices fall within the scope of SDG 16.10 and concern the security sector as they aim to improve security sector governance. For the purposes of this report, they are grouped into three broad strategies:

1. Using available official information, such as legislation, budgets and reports
2. Mechanisms to enhance transparency by comparing official data (or lack thereof) with other publicly available information
3. Building diverse partnerships and reframing narratives

This workshop report, and the good practices therein, aim to inspire the work of CSOs engaging with the security sector on issues of access to information, especially in complex and restrictive environments.

While all practices should be tailored to specific country-contexts, those contained in this report provide are intended to provide insights into how civil society can contribute to improve transparency and accountability in the security sector, thereby furthering the aspirations of SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions. Further, the recommendations contained in this report are equally applicable to national contexts where a law on freedom of access to information exists, as well as those in which it does not, but where civil

society can leverage publicly available data to create demand for more improved transparency and accountability in the security sector.

Preconditions for civic engagement on security issues

Several preconditions exist for the meaningful engagement of civil society on issues related to access to information in the security sector. For example, civil society should have sufficient technical skills and knowledge on SSG/R and ATI. For this reason, CSOs seeking to improve accountability and transparency in the security sector may begin by mapping and comparing the existing competencies of security sector institutions, including oversight bodies, against international standards. In such a way, civil society can build expertise on the functions of security actors and, in particular, the mandates and powers of security providers, and whether these correspond with available data on their conduct and performance, and with international standards and norms. When assessing transparency in the security sector, civil society can use the Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information as a benchmark. The Tshwane Principles are the most widely recognized and authoritative set of principles addressing how to ensure access to government information without jeopardizing legitimate efforts to protect against national security threats.

Thereafter, civil society can disseminate such information through user-friendly means, thereby "demystify" the security sector through sensitizing the public to the workings of security institutions. For example, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, an independent research centre dedicated to advancing the security of citizens and society, produces manuals, backgrounders (documents and video), "CVs" or "IDs" of security sector institutions, as well as bibliographies and chronologies of specific issues related to the security sector and its actors. In doing so, it is able to compile and disseminate key information on the security sector in concise and accessible formats. In Serbia, these products are widely used by journalists and shared with each new cohort of MPs to strengthen their understanding of security institutions and enable them to exercise effective parliamentary oversight over the provision and management of security. In another example given during the workshop, NAKO, the Independent Anti-Corruption Commission of Ukraine (previously known as the

Independent Defence Anti-Corruption Committee) conducted a mapping of national security sector stakeholders within the defence industry, so as raise awareness on the need for additional reforms in the Ukraine's military-industrial complex.

1. Use of available official information: legislation, budgets and reports

With sufficient knowledge of the security sector, civil society can use available official data to advocate for improvements in the provision and management of security. This can be done by identifying, analysing and using already available official data and reports on legislation, budgets and the performance of security actors. Through doing so, CSOs can enhance their understanding of challenges facing the security sector in terms of access to information, be they legislative deficiencies, budgetary inconsistences, tendencies to over-classify information, or bureaucratic obstacles to making access to information requests. This strategy is applicable to countries without a law on freedom of access to information, or where such a law exists but where implementation challenges persist. Through using official data on legislation governing security actors, and comparing it to their actual performance and conduct, CSOs can also track and compare national trends and standards against international norms and use such information to advocate for corrective action.

In another instance, the work of RESDAL, the Security and Defence Network of Latin America – a CSO based in Argentina and Uruguay – was highlighted, in particular their report 'Comparative Atlas of Defence in Latin America and the Caribbean'. As the first source of information on regional security and defence issues, the Atlas compiles official data and information on security and defence institutions across Latin America and the Caribbean. This information is presented in a comparative and country-specific manner, allowing the reader to understand the mandates and responsibilities of security and defence actors across the region. The Atlas also contains analytical papers written by members of the RESDAL to assist in interpretation of the data presented within it. The Atlas was first published in 2004, and is an example of how CSOs can use already available official information to assess the conformance of security actors with the standards of good security sector governance.

The work of Mexico Unido Contra la Delincuencia (MUCD), a

CSO that focuses on security, justice and peace in Mexico, was given as an example of how CSOs can use information already in the public domain to advocate for improvements in the provision and management of security. As one of their flagship initiatives, MUCD implements the project 'Militarisation of Public Security Provision in Mexico'. A key result of this initiative is the tracking of legislation that transfers mandates for public security to the armed forces as a means to tackle the country's high levels of violence or specific issues such as illegal migration. Based on these results, MUCD partnered with other CSOs, and, through their litigation services, the organisation won an injunction against an agreement that empowered the Armed Forces to carry out public security tasks until March 2024. In the ruling, the competent tribunal recognized that the agreement did not meet national and international standards as regard the participation of armed forces in domestic security matters, noting that it did not comply with the requirements of exceptionality, temporality, territorial delimitation or subordination to civil authorities.

While the results of the ruling remain contested, the project shows how CSOs can effectively leverage information already in the public domain to document whether the powers and mandates of security actors correspond to international norms and standards.

In another example, I WATCH, a Tunisian CSO that aims to combat financial and administrative corruption and enhance transparency, produced a regional report that assessed the conformance of national legislation on ATI in Tunisia, Morocco, Lebanon and Jordan with international standards and norms. Through this comparative perspective, which relied on already available information – primarily national legislation on ATI – the report shed light on challenges and gaps in the implementation of the law and provided recommendations to policymakers and actors working on ATI.

Budget and procurement analysis is another tool available to CSOs to exercise their security sector oversight function, and one which was highlighted during the workshop. Budgets are an important information source for civil society seeking to engage on SSG/R as they are publicly available in almost all countries, even those without legal regimes on freedom of access to information. Through accessing state budgets or reviewing annual financial statements by parliaments and

ministries of finance, CSOs can gain a better understanding of the budgets of security institutions, and their distribution according to headline items or, where available, detailed budget lines. In doing so, they can oversee priorities of allocation within the security sector as well as the implementation of financial management rules and control mechanisms that are publicly available, such as procurement rules. Reports by independent audit institutions and bodies responsible for reviewing financial aspects of the security sector may also be publicly available, and often provide an important means to effect budgetary oversight of the security sector.

In one example raised during the workshop, since 2000 RESDAL has analysed the relation between defence budgets and GDP across Latin America in order to reveal the processes of decision-making in developing defense budgets, evaluate their transparency and offer informative tools for those interested in this topic. The main output of the project was the manual 'The defence budget in Latin America: the importance of transparency and tools for an independent monitoring'. The Open Budget Survey, the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, and the IIIS Military Balance were also cited as important sources of information on defence budgets and financial transparency in the security sector.

During the workshop, it was also noted that analysing publicly available information on procurement rules and practices can also help to identify corruption risks and red flags. Dr. Stojanović Gajić noted that in 2014, the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) conducted a study into the cost-effectiveness of procurement in the Serbian security sector. In addition to using publicly available information, they consulted stakeholders including government ministries, unions of employees in the armed forces and the police and the association of bidders. In doing so, they became aware of a number of defects in combat boots issued to police officers under a contract signed by the Ministry of Interior. Relying on the right to access information as enshrined in Serbian law, BCSP conducted an investigation into procurement practices around the purchasing of the boots, mobilizing public pressure and ultimately resulting in criminal procedures being sought over the procurement. This led to improvements in the equipment used by the Serbian Police, positioning BCSP as a defender of the rights of citizens as well as of persons

employed in the security sector.

In addition to publicly available information on legislation and its implementation, and on budgets and procurement procedures, CSOs can also use thematic reports produced by national or international organisations as a comparative tool to assess the conformance of their security sector with international norms and standards. During the workshop, the multi-stakeholder project 'Monitoring Lethal Force: Enhancing State Accountability for Loss of Life in Law Enforcement' was highlighted as an illustrative example. The project brings together universities and police academies from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and South Africa to monitor the quality of official statistics provided by security providers and independent oversight bodies on the use of lethal force by the police. It aims to support debate, research and advocacy to improve practices around the use of lethal force by law enforcement bodies.

2. **Mechanisms to enhance transparency by comparing official data (or lack thereof) with other publicly available information**

The workshop highlighted that in cases where CSOs do not have access to official data on the security sector; where such data is incomplete, or where concerns exist that the data may be flawed or incomplete, they can leverage media and citizen reporting to enhance transparency by contrasting official data, or lack thereof, with other publicly available information.

During the workshop, the work of the Iran Prison Atlas (IPA) was highlighted as an example. The IPA is a database of political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Iran, created in 2011 and administered by the CSO United for Iran. In cooperation with local researchers who collect data provided by prisoners' family members, media, CSOs, and other protected sources, IPA collates, verifies, and publishes information on political prisoners and prisoners of conscience; on the prisons and conditions under which these persons are held; and on the courts that passed sentences. This data is then compared to that provided by Iranian authorities, and used to exert international pressure on the Iranian government to improve treatment of political prisoners and prisoners of consciousness. Data from the IPA has been used by many CSOs, the United Nations Special Rapporteur, international human rights monitors, UN human rights bodies, and

international lawyers to report on the situation of human rights in Iran.

Another example included the work of the Tunisian investigative journalism organisation Inkyfada which, since 2011 and in cooperation with Tunisian League for Human Rights, has reported on deaths caused by police violence and compared these to reports (or the lack thereof) made by the competent authorities. Their work has led to calls for enhanced accountability in the Tunisian law enforcement sector, and has mobilized public support and awareness around the issue of police violence.

Safe Soldiers for a Safe Armenia is a website and a project implemented by the Armenian CSO Peace Dialogue, and was raised as another example of how CSOs can compare official data (or lack thereof) with other publicly available information to improve transparency in the security sector. The website contains data about non-combat related fatalities in the Armenian Armed Forces since 1994, as well as other cases of human rights violations among servicemembers. Data collected from families and through complaints, as well as from other official sources, are verified by human rights experts and publicized to create public demand for increased human rights protections in the armed forces.

Monitor de Víctimas is a monitoring initiative of the Venezuelan organisation Mi Convive, and was highlighted during the workshop. It collects and presents data on cases of alleged killings of civilians by police and associated paramilitary structures. The project combines investigative journalism and citizen participation to study and systematize data on alleged homicides and human rights abuses committed by security forces in the Metropolitan Area of Caracas, Lara, Zulia, Sucre and Táchira. In the absence of comprehensive official data on police violence, the project aims to raise public awareness on the issue and generate more demand for policies to reduce and prevent police violence.

In another example, six years after publishing the results of its first survey on so-called petty corruption, the Tunisian Association of Public Auditors published updated findings in 2020. The findings sought to assess the state's capacity to address petty corruption, and provide data to inform the elaboration of public policies designed to combat this phenomenon. The report, realised with the support of the US

National Centre for State Courts, provided an overview of the status of petty corruption, including with respect to the security sector; assessed the role of the various actors involved in this phenomenon and in the fight against corruption, and provided policy proposals to control petty corruption.

INFORMINI, a Tunisian online platform that helps citizens to submit requests for access to information, was raised as an example of how access to information requests can be used to compare data to official statistics, or to "fill" data gaps in cases where such information is not available. The project was born from collaboration between the Tunisian CSOs Onshor and Go Act, the Tunisian Association of Public Auditors, and the US NGO Financial Services Volunteer Corps. Through the platform, ATI requests can be addressed to all publicly funded bodies, national and local institutions such as government agencies, municipalities, public independent bodies, as well as ministries, including those responsible for managing security provision. All requests and responses by state authorities are accessible online. These requests provide a clear picture of the information needs of Tunisian civil society, and the effectiveness of the ATI processes and procedures within Tunisian institutions.

3. Build diverse partnerships and reframe narratives

The workshop also bought to the fore the importance of CSOs forming, joining and or establishing broad coalitions or networks in order to utilize complementary expertise and enhance and leverage their work across different segments of society. In addition, the importance of reframing narratives was highlighted, in which CSOs can, for example, reframe security-related issues in broader development language so as raise their profile among wider segments of society, or as a means to engage state authorities in dialogue on contentious issues.

One example raised of building diverse partnerships and re-framing narratives concerns the work of the Brazilian CSO, Igarapé Institute, who work towards the implementation of evidence-based public policies to improve access to security. They implemented the campaign Nao Somos Alvo (We're Not Targets), which was raised during the workshop as an example of how CSOs can reframe narratives in order to engage the public on sensitive issues. The campaign sought to highlight the risks of deregulating arms and ammunition control in

Brazil, and to address, through hope-based communication strategies, its relation to organized crime and the illicit drugs trade. In addition to this, the Igarapé Institute conducted a campaign titled [Pense Levre](#) (Think Free). This was innovative in that it 'reframed' the illicit drugs trade as a health and poverty issue by focusing on its 'downstream' or secondary effects, and built diverse partnerships around the issue by engaging with various stakeholders, including decision-makers, the media, doctors, lawyers, survivor associations, human rights defenders, faith-based actors and cultural icons.

In another example of reframing narratives, in Romania in 2015, public protestors adopted the slogan "Corruption kills", following the death of 64 people in a nightclub fire which was blamed on lax safety standards and building regulations due to corruption amongst public officials. The demands of the protesters included new anti-corruption laws, and higher pay for doctors and police to make them less prone to seeking and taking bribes. This example shows the utility of re-framing narratives in order to mobilize public support – in this case by reframing petty corruption as threats to life, and thus mobilizing support to address the former.

Conclusion

The workshop underscored the importance of access to information for effective public oversight of the security sector. Noting the many challenges in accessing security-related information, and legitimate concerns regarding national security, the workshop presented a number of strategies which can be used by CSOs to access information and mobilize public support for improving security sector governance. Based on these strategies, the following recommendations can be made:

➢ CSOs should enhance their technical knowledge and thematic expertise on SSG/R and ATI in order to establish credibility vis-à-vis the security sector. In so doing, they can add value to existing reform processes and challenge entrenched narratives.

➢ CSOs should support demand for accountability in the security sector by "demystifying" the security sector through using publicly available information from official sources or produced by citizens to create demand for accountability and reframe public concerns as broader societal or developmental challenges.

➢ CSOs should adopt a constructive approach in engaging state authorities and focus on changing and controlling the narrative, striving for dialogue with statutory security actors to build relationships and, where possible, trust.

➢ CSOs should collaborate around shared issues and build strong networks and partnerships across different sectors and segments of society, while maintaining strong links to local communities. If possible, relations with security institutions or trade unions of security professionals should also be developed to facilitate dialogue and, where possible, build trust with power brokers.

➢ CSOs should leverage the influence and support of regional actors, international platforms and fora and other stakeholders to advocate for inclusive processes, political reform and the protection of civic space.

Further resources

- DCAF (2021), Sustainable Development Goal 16: The importance of good security sector governance for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. SSR Backgrounder Series. Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. Available at: https://www.dcaf.ch/sustainable-development-goal-16

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