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Understanding the Politics of Transparency: (Un)Making Security Futures with Security Sector Reform

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Abstract

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is a central element in re-configuring state-society relations after conflict or authoritarian rule. While SSR as a peacebuilding and democratization instrument has started to include notions of human security beyond hard security, its core goal – creating a trustworthy, accountable security sector – remains grounded in liberal ideals of transparency. Using The Gambia's post-2016 SSR process as a case study, this article examines how transparency is produced and what it conceals, arguing that the pursuit of transparency creates two misconceptions: first, it generates a proliferation of documents, involved actors, and activities that construct a fixed, "as if" vision of reform, stifling societal debate on what is desirable. Second, this "as if" imaginary frames reform as a linear, technical process, de-politicizing the reform process and leaving implementation to experts. Ultimately, such transparency serves as lip service to externally shaped, idealized security futures, leaving SSR hidden and uncontestable for the wider public.

Zusammenfassung

Die Reform des Sicherheitssektors (SSR) stellt ein zentrales Element bei der Neugestaltung der Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft nach einem Konflikt oder einer Phase autoritärer Herrschaft dar. Auch wenn SSR als Instrument der Friedenskonsolidierung und Demokratisierung mittlerweile Aspekte menschlicher Sicherheit als Erweiterung zu traditionellen Sicherheitsverständnissen integriert hat, bleibt das Kernziel, nämlich die Schaffung eines Sicherheitssektors, der auf Transparenz und Rechenschaftspflicht basiert, nach wie vor auf liberalen Idealen begründet. Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht anhand des gambischen SSR-Prozesses nach 2016, wie Transparenz hergestellt wird und was dabei verborgen bleibt. Wir führen die Argumentation an, dass das Bestreben, Transparenz zu erlangen, zu zwei Missverständnissen führt. Erstens beobachten wir eine Zunahme von Dokumenten, beteiligten Akteuren und Aktivitäten, die eine „Als-ob“-Vision der Reform konstruieren und eine gesellschaftliche Debatte über die wünschenswerten Ziele ersticken. Zweitens wird durch diese „Als-ob“-Vorstellung die Reform als linearer, technischer Prozess dargestellt, wodurch der Reformprozess entpolitisiert und die Umsetzung Expert:innen überlassen wird. Eine derartige Transparenz fungiert folglich als Lippenbekenntnis zu einer von externen Sicherheitsvorstellungen geprägten, idealisierten Sicherheitszukunft und lässt den SSR-Prozess für die breite Öffentlichkeit verborgen und unanfechtbar erscheinen.

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

In moments of political transitions, Security Sector Reform (SSR) has become one of the key reform agendas in order to base security institutions on democratic norms and to ensure civilian oversight. When security institutions have failed to provide security in the past, have become a source of insecurity themselves and gambled away public trust, reform processes most commonly focus on making security institutions more transparent and accountable to the public. The production of transparency by means of information provision, however, is too often taken for granted as the necessary success factor for such reformed and accountable security institutions.

One such example is the recent death of Omar Badjie in The Gambia in late September 2025 (Jaiteh 2025, Jawo 2025). The youth died “during a routine police control” (Badjie 2025) with the Gambian Police Force (GPF). Shortly after, violent protests erupted demanding an “exhaustive and transparent” (Badjie 2025) as well as “full investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death” (Tendeng 2025), with several protesters detained after all. What had happened? This question was left unaddressed despite official statements by the Ministry of Interior (2025) and the Gambian Police Force (2025). Despite the attempt to clarify the circumstances of Omar Badjie’s death and to calm the protests, the mere act of providing information to the public was not enough. Eight years after the Gambian government has launched its Security Sector Reform (SSR), this short episode points not only to the question where the SSR process in The Gambia is at (Bah and Tarawally 2025) but also to the larger question, what role the (un)making of transparency plays in reforming security institutions.

In this working paper, we introduce the case study of the SSR process in The Gambia since 2016 and pursue the question how transparency is produced and what is concealed in this process. Contrary to the assumption that transparency is per se positive for the accountability of security institutions, we argue that the form of transparency matters and whether it is rooted in a societal discussion of what transparent security institutions of the future should look like. To make that case, we distinguish between *illusionary/performative transparency* and *contestable/deliberative transparency*. The proliferation of documents is not enough to (re-)create trust and public ownership as well as to demonstrate political will but only performs illusionary transparency at the detriment of a publicly owned contestable and negotiable future vision(s) of a reformed security sector.

To lay the ground for this line of argumentation, we integrate two hitherto separate strands of literature. First, we build on the classical peacebuilding literature with a particular focus on security sector reform with the (still) dominant narrative of the liberal development catalogue that contains the objective of transparent security institutions so that the public can hold the latter accountable. In other words, this strand of literature conceives of liberal and democratic state institutions as ultimately dedicated to transparency and, hence, accountability (Edmunds 2012; Albrecht and Stepputat 2015; Chappius and Siegle 2015; Bisarya and Choudhry 2020), but has faced increasing criticism for the “elusive and contradictory nature of SSR as a guiding vision and a policy approach” (Mannitz 2014, 270), depoliticizing SSR to a merely technocratic process (see for example Abrahamsen 2018, Jackson 2018, Wilén 2018, Rotmann 2018). Second, we draw on more general anthropological and philosophical critiques of transparency as “a form of political microscopy” (Barry 2008, cited

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in Appel 2019, 253). Rooted in earlier works that focus on what the production of transparency conceals (see for example Power 1997; Strathern 2000; Roberts 2009), more recent works use the lens of transparency to demonstrate how political projects are reduced to technocratic processes (Hetherington 2011; Ballesteros 2012; Shore and Wright 2015; Appel 2019). As a result, transparent security sectors risk degenerating into an imaginary or fictional future state, where it is merely assumed that transparency will (re-)build accountability, state-society relations, and civil-military relations. Integrating these two strands helps us to understand the production of transparency as a process, critically engaging with modern temporal dynamics of development.

In doing so, we challenge the assumption that the provision of information is enough to create transparent and accountable security institutions. By focusing on the processes of reforming the security sector, the actual objective of this reform is obscured, or at least remains undiscussed/uncontested. This is problematic in at least two regards: one, liberal development scripts theoretically depict policy programs such as SSR as recast of administrative and technical matters to be handled by experts, removing them from the realm of contestable politics. This approach is still reflected in the empirical field of internationally funded peacebuilding efforts. Second, removing a reform process from the realm of contestable politics leads to the impression that the objective for a future reformed security sector is already agreed upon, clear and unified. However, since the future is an “ambiguous painting that allows for a multitude of interpretations” (DiMaggio 2002, 90; Tischler 2013; see also Brendel 2020), a reform process that remains exclusive and reduced to its technicalities becomes a one-way street to a vague future end-state as *if* the future is set out clearly.

This working paper draws its observations from the security sector reform process in The Gambia that has been ongoing since a change in power in 2016. As one of the first African Union (AU) member states to implement the comprehensive AU SSR Policy, The Gambia has been running a SSR program, including among others the military, police, and intelligence services. Based on the analysis of key strategy documents and national policies by the Gambian government and Gambian security institutions as well as field research from one of the authors (albeit for a different research project), we pursue the question of how transparency is produced and what is concealed in the process. More concretely, our analysis in the form of a mapping exercise unfolds in three steps: First, we study the key strategy documents and national policies for identifying how the future reformed security sector is described and how transparency is negotiated in these documents. Secondly, we identify the actors involved in the SSR process who do (not) have an interest in transparency and examine their position within the SSR process, among others relating to the (un)making of transparency. Thirdly, we cluster certain types of activities that are at the core of the Gambian SSR process to explore how transparency is (un)made.

Overall, we find a continuous proliferation of strategy documents, stakeholder forums, workshops, exercises and roundtables, where the Gambian government, in conjunction with external actors, is working on transparency within the SSR process, so that it comes across as if information is abundant, complete and unmediated. At the same time, the government distances itself from the deliberately created public SSR process and we observe particularly powerful expert ontologies and epistemologies entangled in the Gambian SSR process. Consequently, we demonstrate that SSR itself is often treated as an “as if” phenomenon, both in the sense of a desired process and a political project (see also Pye 2025), by those driving SSR processes, such as governments and external actors. Instead of a participatory process, SSR often remains a linear, incremental movement through time. In doing so, we point to the dangers of treating security sector reform processes as “as if”

phenomenon, where a discussion about the future takes a back seat, leaving the floor to the unmediated/unnegotiated assumption of a future state of transparent security sectors. In a nutshell, our findings reflect a condensed observation by Shore and Wright who argue that transparency programs often “recast political programs as mundane administrative and technical matters to be dealt with by experts, thereby masking their ideological content and removing them from the realm of contestable politics” (2015, 412). Empirically, these findings also speak to regional dynamics and hence a broader range of cases, such as other states in West Africa like Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, or Nigeria (see for example, Müller 2020; Ehlert 2025; Kohl 2025).

The working paper is structured in six parts. In the next section, we set out the analytical framework by integrating two strands of literature, these are classical peacebuilding literature and critiques of transparency and transparent futures. Sections three and four provide an introduction of the Gambian case of SSR and a mapping of reform documents, actors, and activities as part of this reform process. Section five discusses the findings of the mapping and what it means for the (un)making of transparency and security futures. Finally, we conclude by delineating illusionary/performative from contestable/deliberative transparency and propose future research avenues.

2. TRANSPARENCY AND SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

Understanding better how transparency and Security Sector Reform (SSR) are interlinked both in theory and practice as part of wider peacebuilding efforts is what drives this working paper. Therefore, we integrate classical peacebuilding literature and more general anthropological and philosophical critiques of transparency in order to demonstrate how approaching reform processes as “as if” phenomena and their removal from contestable politics risks the renewal and (re-)building of state-society and civil-military relations after moments of political crises and conflict.

2.1 SSR: *Origins and normative assumptions*

Security Sector Reform (SSR) has become a direct result of and response to urgent security and development challenges in the 1990s, when the end of the Cold War marked a critical shift in thinking about the role of the military in “developing countries” (on the link between SSR and development, see e.g. Jean 2005; Detzner 2017). Accordingly, a wide range of SSR initiatives emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as key policy documents framed the reform of security institutions as essential to democratic governance (Ball 1998; Hendrickson 1999; Brzoska 2003; OECD/DAC 2005; Abrahamsen 2018). Central to this agenda was the expectation that transparency and democratic accountability would transform formerly opaque security apparatuses into structures supportive of governance and development goals. As Clare Short, the former British Minister of State for International Development, noted at the time, the aim was to “support and encourage a strengthening of democratic accountability and transparency in the security sector, and to reshape the security sectors so that they complement our poverty reduction objectives” (quoted in Hendrickson 1999, 10). In her 1999 speech, she helped articulate the term “Security Sector Reform” and emphasized that “state, regional and even global stability is not simply a matter of relations between states. Rather, it is a function of the well-being of the people who make up those nations” (Short 1999). With underdevelopment being increasingly securitized, the limited territorial control by states over their internationally recognized territories was perceived as a threat to the international community (Duffield 2000; Abrahamsen 2005; Döring and

Herpolsheimer 2023). Accompanied by calls for security measures and interventions, SSR eventually emerged as a critical target of post-conflict state-building to counter dysfunctional civil-military relations. For this purpose, the SSR agenda has grown into a cluster of norms including democracy, good governance, gender equality, transparency, accountability, and respect for universal human rights (Jackson 2018).

The basic assumption is that transition to a democratic system of governance is not complete until the security forces are brought under the control of civilian, democratic authorities that ensure accountability and are governed by the rule of law (Chappius and Siegle 2015; Bisarya and Choudhry 2020). After transitioning from conflict and/or authoritarian regimes, prominent challenges are, among others, a highly centralized and excessively inflated security sector that lacks civilian oversight. In The Gambia, these challenges are deeply rooted in the country's colonial legacy, where under indirect British rule security forces such as the Royal West African Frontier Force (RWAFF) and local paramilitary units primarily served colonial interests rather than providing protection for Gambians, leaving much of the rural population outside the reach of state security and initially raising expectations and imaginations of a centralized state security sector (Mamdani 1996; Hultin and Davidheiser 2012). This historical absence of effective, locally accountable security structures has persisted into the post-colonial era, shaping the current challenges of reforming the Gambian security sector (Barchet and Birchinger 2022).

SSR therefore inherently involves the dual nature of security governance: the security forces are both the agents responsible for providing security and the very objects of reform, since they also hold the potential to threaten those they are meant to protect. The central objective of SSR is thus to establish "safeguards" that ensure democratic and civilian oversight. The goal is to prevent the state, particularly the central government, from placing itself above the law. At its core, it is an agenda designed to curb the power of abusive and repressive regimes (Andersen 2011, 9).

2.2 *Transparency: Grasping a far-reaching concept*

The field of transparency research has grown steadily over the past thirty years, indicating increased attention to its concept and policy implications. This growth is marked by a diverse academic landscape and numerous methodological approaches. From an instrumental condition (Heald 2006) to a mechanism enabling trust (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012), to a political agency (Meijer et al. 2018), the literature offers various theoretical and empirical references to good governance, public administrations, and other fields. In international relations, transparency occupies a central place in debates over the security dilemma and institutional trust. It is often celebrated for its ability to enhance accountability and integrity within governance systems.

As Roberto Cruz Romero (2023) observes, is a common thread running through much of the literature, valued for its potential to curb corruption and to create opportunities through institutional and legal design. Yet, this focus has frequently come at the expense of conceptual precision. Transparency is most often invoked in relation to freedom of information, but reducing it to a moral issue – or equating it solely with the fight against corruption – fails to capture its broader systemic and political scope. Transparency is rather a systemic compulsion that affects all social processes and subjects them to serious change (Han 2012). Similarly, Jonathan Fox (2007) argues that an extraordinarily wide range of political and policy actors have embraced the principles of transparency and accountability in a remarkably short space of time. This broad appeal testifies not only to its trans-ideological character – and to the convergence of forces from above and below that have embraced

it. It also underlines the need to clarify what exactly the terms mean, for whom and in what context (ibid., 663). While there are definitions that are more or less concise and useful for empirical research (Finel and Lord 1999; Buchanan and Keohane 2006; Florini 2007, 201–204), they often lack detailed descriptions of their components. The conditions under which transparency can be meaningfully asserted remain underspecified, and its historical scope and context are underexplored. The internal relations of the concept of transparency – such as “participation” being internal to “democracy” or “wage labor” to “capitalism” – are rarely discussed in detail (McCarthy and Fluck 2017, 419). Questions of reflexivity and the relation between scholars and their objects of study are likewise insufficiently addressed, suggesting the need for greater conceptual clarification in research on transparency. As this project of defining concepts precisely is beyond the scope of this working paper and we are not (primarily) presenting a conceptual work on the term “transparency”, we nevertheless recognize how the use of clear, resonant and precise concepts is essential for productive theoretical and empirical analysis (Gerring 1999).

In states, we can define transparency as legal, political and institutional structures that provide information about the internal characteristics of a government and society to actors inside and outside the national political system. Transparency allows outsiders such as multinational enterprises or global political indicator and assessment organizations to recognize a number of important factors such as relative capabilities, risk aversion or acceptance, interests and intentions (Mitchell 1988, 111). In general, transparency is enhanced by any mechanism that leads to the disclosure of information, such as a free press, public government hearings, and the existence of nongovernmental organizations that have an incentive to publish objective information about the government. For McCarthy and Fluck (2017, 433), “transparency-as-disclosure” therefore emphasizes the need for institutional change to provide more information but fails to capture the social conditions under which the relationship between the public and institutions has evolved. In contrast, “transparency-as-information” (ibid., 432) focuses on how actors can produce the right kind of information for a particular activity, without addressing how specific institutional configurations limit and shape transparency as a political practice.

For a security sector that, as in the Gambian case, has not responded to established rules and regulations for 22 years, this implies the difficult task of changing the DNA of security institutions in such a way that prevents them from existing as a “lawless autocracy” (Nwabueze 1994, 4) detached from accountability and civilian control. In the context of security sector reform, like in the German government’s SSR strategy, transparency is often mentioned in conjunction with democratic oversight and accountability of the security sector. The rationale is to ensure that citizens have the right and accurate information about the SSR process and the workings of the security sector once the SSR process is concluded.

This is also reflected in the position by the Gambian government (adopting a UN definition), which states that transparency is integral to democratic oversight and accountability as part of any SSR initiative:

“A political and technical process of improving state and human security by making security provision, management and oversight more effective and more accountable, within a framework of democratic civilian control, rule of law and respect for human rights” (United Nations SSR Perspective, September 2017).” (The Republic of The Gambia 2023)

Peter Ekeh's "Two Publics"

Since this paper cannot delve deeply into the historical development of the relationship between the public sphere and state institutions, it is nevertheless important to clarify the specific understanding of "public" that underpins our analysis. We draw here on one of the most frequently cited and influential works in the field of African political studies: Peter P. Ekeh's article "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement", published in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (1975). Ekeh argues that two distinct publics emerged in African contexts. On the one hand, he identifies the "primordial public", a social sphere rooted in ethnic, communal, and local affiliations, which developed in response to the alienating character of the colonial (and later postcolonial) state and its failure to meet the basic welfare and developmental needs of the population. This public stepped in where the state fell short, taking on essential functions such as education, healthcare, and social support – not through formal institutions, but through self-help initiatives and collectively organized resources. In this sense, it often operates as a "shadow state," filling the gaps left by the official one (Osaghae 2006, 238). This reflects one of Ekeh's core arguments, that the distinctive nature and pathologies of contemporary African politics are rooted in and shaped by the colonial experience, a point our own analysis of SSR in The Gambia underlines, highlighting how historical structures of the security sector continue to shape current reform efforts and societal expectations (Barchet and Birchinger 2022).

In contrast, the "civic public" is historically associated with the colonial administration and, in the postcolonial era, has become the arena of popular politics (Ekeh 1975, 92). While Ekeh does not equate the civic public directly with the state, he emphasizes its close ties to state institutions such as the civil service, police, and military. The civic public represents a sphere governed by legal-rational norms and impersonal structures (Osaghae 2006, 239). In other words, when we talk about transparency as something achieved through disclosure and an abundance of information, it is important to adopt a more nuanced perspective – one that considers whether we are referring to a public sphere marked by detachment from the state or one that is closely intertwined with it.

2.3 SSR and transparency as part of the liberal peacebuilding agenda

The idea of international post-conflict peacebuilding projects proposes to support states to establish institutions that sustain peace by upholding the rule of law, liberal democracy, and a market-based economy. These efforts are at the core of international organizations like the UN but also the African Union when it comes to the promotion of international peace and security (Campbell and Matanock 2024).

The liberal template

When discussing SSR, it is essential to recognize that the concept itself comes from a particular theoretical standpoint. First, SSR is based on the assumption that security and development are inseparably linked (security-development nexus). Second, the dominant idea is that democratizing war-torn societies will promote peace, order, and stability on both national and international levels (liberal peace thesis). The liberal framework is also evident in SSR's emphasis on ensuring that the state is capable of fulfilling its functions – namely, providing security and justice to its citizens and maintaining law and order within its territory. In this sense, SSR represents the "return of the state," a notion introduced in the World Bank's 1997 World Development Report, which highlighted the state's role in creating an enabling environment for sustainable peace and development. Thus, SSR constitutes a

key element of the broader state-building agenda, which currently serves as the dominant liberal narrative for understanding and addressing complex political crises in the “Global South”.

However, given the inherent normative positionality of the concept, SSR should also be critically examined. It cannot simply be assumed that the needs and priorities linked to this term align with those of the local population and political leadership within the reform context. Furthermore, conflicts may emerge between internal power dynamics and externally imposed requirements or frameworks. Likewise, external prescriptions should not automatically be considered more legitimate or important than locally driven processes.

To continue the filtering process, we consider transparency not just as a component of the SSR norm cluster, but also as one endowed with a particular directional dynamic. This dynamic envisions a future where the security sector is accountable, transparent, and responsive to the security and justice needs of the population, grounded in democratic norms and principles. When the Gambian government developed a SSR strategy in April 2020, it adhered to the classic SSR objectives of establishing “democratic, accountable, and transparent security forces characterized by good governance and the rule of law” (Wilén 2018, 65). The premise is that a purely technical approach to security issues will result in institutions and policies closely aligned with real-world politics, since institutions—and the concepts they generate—are assumed to be primarily defined by their functionality and thus fully intelligible through their practical purpose (Castoriadis 1990 [1975], 196 ff.). Thus, this liberal theory of transparency in politics also reveals a particular theory of social change. For instance, if information reveals that security institutions are not controlled by civilian, democratic authorities that ensure accountability through a system of democratic oversight subject to the rule of law, it will trigger a cascade of political change (Chappuis and Siegle 2015; Appel 2019; Bisarya and Choudhry 2020). Gregg Hetherington (2011) offers a useful summary of the political theory undergirding transparency:

“If authoritarianism was built on the state’s control of information, then democracy is to be built by giving citizens access to, and indeed control over and responsibility for, all information. This ultimately is what a transparent society is supposed to look like: all state knowledge is public knowledge, and citizens can therefore “see” what goes on in government and in the economy, not directly, but by receiving information about it. Transparency is information so complete that it seems unmediated; it is an access to the real through a medium so perfect as to disappear from the scene it is describing. This can never be realized, but remains always the ideal: a world of perfect information in which citizens and entrepreneurs can make fully informed decisions about how to organize their society. Capable at last of choosing rationally among political and market options, governments will be held accountable, corruption will decrease accordingly, and markets will become more efficient, leading to better growth, and hoisting developing countries out of poverty.” (ibid., 6–7; see also Appel 2019, 248)

Embedded in this theory of political change are a series of assumptions: an already assembled public just waiting for information, an already ordered national economy, or a nationally organized order of things separate from external actors. Anthropologist Hannah Appel (2019, 248) describes these assumptions as part of the imaginary of liberal politics and a vast industry. However, they are also based on a significant fallacy. Transparency is described as a liberal ideal where state knowledge becomes public knowledge, allowing citizens to see government and economic activities clearly.

This ideal assumes that citizens and entrepreneurs, equipped with perfect information, can

make rational decisions that hold governments accountable and reduce corruption (Beckert 2018). However, since this liberal vision of transparency also reveals inconsistencies in its implementation, the following considerations examine the convergence of critical voices from classical peacebuilding literature and critiques of transparency from interdisciplinary perspectives. This approach aims to analytically frame SSR as a purely technical and depolarizing process endowed with a particular directional dynamic, giving it an “as if” character.

Criticism for depoliticizing SSR to a merely technocratic process

One strand of literature that critically engages with the liberal script addressing the fallacy of transparency from an analytical perspective comes from recent research on Security Sector Reform (SSR) in post-conflict countries. This critical strand of second-generation SSR literature emerged from the realization that there is no universal template for what the outcome of SSR should look like (Sedra 2018; Donais 2018). Instead, SSR programs must be tailored to the specific political, social, economic, and security dynamics of the recipient country (Stéphane 2005). In particular, the power dynamics within reform contexts must be considered, as the core of SSR touches on the question of what power means within a state (Abrahamsen 2018; Jackson 2018; Wilén 2018; Rotmann 2018). Research that advocates for a second-generation model of SSR highlights the tension between externally driven SSR programs and the contextual realities in countries affected by conflict or transition processes, pointing to a persistent gap between theory and practice (Andersen 2012; Jackson 2018; Donais 2018; Sedra 2018; Baaz and Verweijen 2018; Ansorg and Gordon 2019). Specifically, in African contexts, it is argued that most security for ordinary people is not provided by the state (Detzner 2017; Ansorg and Gordon 2019). Contemporary representations of statehood in Africa are thus moving away from a fixed view of formal state actors and institutions towards a more sociological understanding of a plurality of different centers of power that exist within, at the interface of, and outside the bureaucratic apparatus (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Müller 2020). Many peacebuilding activities and discourses have been standardized, with a significant demand for “best practice” and “lessons learned” formats within the SSR community of practice, both theoretically and operationally. These formats are continually being professionalized and are largely based on case studies of SSR programs implemented in recent years (Ansorg and Gordon 2019). The danger behind this reading of a standardized SSR process, in which transparency has “not yet” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 35) been established as a liberal element, is a depoliticizing effect in this respect, since the course of events is often treated as predetermined.

While “politics” refers to the institutional perspective related to an existing political order, the concept of “the political” focuses on the dimensions of political practice that extend beyond this institutional perspective. These dimensions are what bring institutions into existence or, in many cases, open up existing institutional orders to a contesting struggle of interpretation. The distinction between politics and the political allows us to view the constitution of social and political orders themselves as a political process (Flügel-Martinussen 2020, 454). In contrast, thinking of the political emphatically draws attention to the fact that a dimension of questioning existing orders is constitutively inscribed in the political itself (ibid., 455). To complement this strand of critique, critiques of transparency from an anthropological and sociological perspective provide an additional analytical lens through which transparency itself can be described as an “as if” phenomenon.

2.4 Transparency and “as if”

The narrative underlying security sector reform is based on the depiction of a future state, outlining how the present is transformed into the imagined future through causally linked steps (Beckert 2018). In other words, linear, step-by-step movements through time are imagined. Similar to the criticism of transparency as an ineffective industry, this reform process also reveals an “as if” character: future imaginations create their own reality by introducing assumptions that go beyond empirical facts. This vision of the future relies on distant goal images of possible worlds – an “imaginary vanishing point” (Bourdieu 2000, 31) – that are rationally pursued (Beckert 2018, 45) and form the cultural foundation of the concept of progress. In this context, the awareness of the actors is shaped by a “not yet,” which functions as a constant imperative (Koselleck 1979[2022], 35).

However, this forecast overlooks unexpected disruptions and changes, creating a politics of “as if” (Wedeen 1999, cited in Larkin 2013, 335). For example, reform plans are treated as realistic representations, and both their creators and recipients act as though they are consistent documents. The actors act “as if” the described reality actually exists or “as if” certain attributes belong to the essence of an object, even though they have no objective material correlate in the objects. Mbembe and Roitman (1995, 337) described budget plans in their poetic form as “arbitrary symbolic acts” and techniques of governance. While SSR reform documents are not budget plans in this sense, they do regulate how many resources are allocated to security institutions, how training is conducted, and what instrumental contributions are made, such as strengthening transparency and democratic oversight of the security sector. Regarding transparency programs, Chris Shore and Susan Wright (2015, 412) fear that they “recast political programs as mundane administrative and technical matters to be dealt with by experts, thereby masking their ideological content and removing them from the realm of contestable politics” (cited in Appel 2019, 273). Gregg Hetherington thus aptly concludes that “transparency” serves less as a condition of perfect visibility than as a terrain on which competing actors negotiate whose representations of reality are truly “real” (Hetherington 2011, 230).

This opens up the sphere of the “politics of expectations” (Beckert 2018, 131 ff.), as the expectation of a probable or desirable future presence of a transparent security sector becomes itself a political instrument. However, since the future is generally regarded as open, the expectations of the actors are also contingent, i.e. they are not directly determined by the given situation (a liberal peacebuilding agenda), but depend on imperfect information and different interpretations of this information. This is because the future is an “ambiguous painting that allows for a multitude of interpretations” (DiMaggio 2002, 90). The contingency of expectations creates space for a multitude of reactions to a given situation. Moreover, it opens the door to the exercise of power in security institutions. In other words, having power means having one’s expectations of the future be the ones that count.

In his work, Reinhart Koselleck (1979 [2022], 2004) illuminates this dynamic and describes the future – any future – as “horizon of expectation”.² This horizon is

“bound to persons and yet interpersonal at the same time [...], taking place in the present; it is a future made in the present [...] oriented toward the not-yet, toward what has not been experienced, toward what can only be revealed. Hope and fear, desire and will, concern, but also rational analysis, receptive perception, or curiosity all enter into expectations by constituting them.” (354–355)³

2 German original: „Erwartungshorizont“ (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 354). Authors’ translation.

3 German original: „personengebunden und interpersonal zugleich, [...] vollzieht sich im Heute, ist vergegenwärtigt“ (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 354).

Just as the horizon always lies before us, always beyond our reach, so too are expectations – and thus the future – never tangible. In contrast, Koselleck designates the past as “space of experience” (356).⁴ While experience “is a past made present whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered” (354),⁵ he uses the spatial metaphor to emphasize that experience “coalesces into a whole in which multiple layers of earlier times are simultaneously present without offering any indication of what came before or after” (356).⁶ The point is to show that this encompasses both our own experiences and those of others. Expectation, on the other hand, represents a “line [...] beyond which a new space of experience will open up the future but cannot yet be seen” (ibid.).⁷ The accessibility of the future reaches an absolute limit despite possible prognosis, for it cannot be experienced. For Koselleck, the categories of experience and expectation were both highly general and absolutely indispensable. They indicate “different modes of being, out of whose tension something like historical time can be derived” (357).⁸ His thesis is that this experience has changed in modernity, since history is no longer experienced in time but through time. Both categories are “suitable for locating historical time even in the realm of empirical research, because, enriched with content, they guide concrete units of action in the course of social or political movements” (353).⁹ His conception of historical time thus refers specifically to the period of modernity with its teleology of progress. This theoretical view complements our analytical focus that transparency curtails the struggle for different expectations of a future security sector.

3. THE CONTEXT OF SSR IN THE GAMBIA

Security Sector Reform in The Gambia is a reform process that commenced when the country was at crossroad in late 2016 and early 2017. In early 2017, The Gambia witnessed its first democratic leadership transition since independence, ending 22 years of authoritarian rule by former President Yahya Jammeh. Jammeh initially refused to concede his December 2, 2016 election defeat, prompting military intervention by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on January 6, 2017, under the “Restore Democracy” mission. This intervention led to Jammeh’s departure and the swearing in of President Adama Barrow in January 2017. In September 2017, President Barrow’s Security Sector Reform (SSR) initiative was launched and integrated into the National Development Plan (2018–2021) with support from the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN).

tigte Zukunft, [...] zielt auf das Noch-Nicht, auf das nicht Erfahrene, auf das nur Erschließbare. Hoffnung und Furcht, Wunsch und Wille, die Sorge, aber auch rationale Analyse, rezeptive Schau oder Neugierde gehen in die Erwartungen ein, indem sie diese konstituieren” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 354–355). Authors’ translation.

4 German original: „Erfahrungsraum” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 356). Authors’ translation.

5 German original: „ist gegenwärtige Vergangenheit, deren Ereignisse einverleibt worden sind und erinnert werden können” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 354). Authors’ translation.

6 German original: „sich zu einer Ganzheit bündelt, in der viele Schichten früherer Zeiten zugleich präsent sind, ohne über deren vorher oder nachher Auskunft zu geben” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 356). Authors’ translation.

7 German original: „Linie [...], hinter der sich künftig ein neuer Erfahrungsraum eröffnet, aber noch nicht eingesehen werden kann” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 356). Authors’ translation.

8 German original: „ungleiche Seinsweisen, aus deren Spannung sich so etwas wie geschichtliche Zeit ableiten lässt” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 357). Authors’ translation.

9 German original: „geeignet, geschichtliche Zeit auch im Bereich empirischer Forschung aufzuspüren, weil sie, inhaltlich angereichert, die konkreten Handlungseinheiten im Vollzug sozialer oder politischer Bewegung leitet” (Koselleck 1979 [2022], 353). Authors’ translation.

Heavily shaped by its history, three features make the Gambian SSR process particular: First, the aftermath of over two decades of authoritarian rule by Yahya Jammeh reveals not only scars due to systematic human rights violations, torture and abduction, but also, more generally, state-society relations characterised by distrust. Second, The Gambia stands out due to its small size in terms of population and territory where Senegal as the sole neighbour has been playing a central but not uncontested role in The Gambia's past and present security sector (Birchinger et al. 2025). Third, The Gambia is one of the first cases where the AU SSR Policy finds application (Onanga-Anyanga 2023).

A historical perspective provides important context for understanding the structure of the Gambian security sector and the dynamics of its reform process (Barchet and Birchinger 2022). After formal independence from Great Britain in 1965, The Gambia maintained a comparatively small security sector. Under President Dawda Jawara, who led a multiparty democracy with limited political competition, the country relied mainly on a police force and a small paramilitary field force, secured externally through a defense agreement with Senegal (Wiseman 1996; Dwyer 2017). A failed coup attempt in 1981 exposed the weakness of these forces and, with Senegal's intervention required to restore order, led to the creation of a Gambian army. Trained by the British, the army operated alongside a *gendarmerie*¹⁰ established under French and Senegalese influence, though the latter was dissolved in 1992 due to overlapping mandates and internal rivalry (Dwyer 2017).

The Senegambia Confederation (1982–1989) further deepened military integration with Senegal, but dissatisfaction grew over pay disparities and Senegalese dominance. Those deployed to the Confederation received better pay. Tensions increased when Gambian troops returning from ECOMOG deployments in the early 1990s accused the government of withholding their allowances, resulting in mutinies in 1991 and 1992 (Wiseman 1996). A subsequent Nigerian training mission—whose officers were given top positions and better conditions—fueled resentment and ultimately contributed to the 1994 coup that brought Lieutenant Yahya Jammeh to power.

Jammeh's 22-year rule combined personalized control and state coercion. He concentrated authority over military promotions and dismissals, frequently turning against his own appointees in a style marked by arbitrariness and violence (Dwyer 2020, 2023). Ethnic favoritism toward his own Jola group, repeated purges, and fabricated coup attempts created deep mistrust across the forces (Dwyer 2017; Aubyn 2022). Jammeh also established parallel coercive bodies such as the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) and the Jungulars (also known as the Patrol Team), a paramilitary hit squad implicated in human rights abuses (UNHR 2014). By the end of Jammeh's rule, The Gambia's security apparatus had become fragmented, opaque, and subordinated to the regime's survival rather than national security (Mutangadura 2020).

After 22 years of autocratic rule, former President Yahya Jammeh lost the presidential election in December 2016. After having initially accepted the election result, he refused to step down a few days later (Hartmann 2017; Hultin et al. 2017). Only through concerted action, including public protest movements such as #GambiaHasDecided, the reluctance of the Gambian armed forces to become involved, as well as multiple rounds of shuttle diplomacy initiated by AU and ECOWAS in combination with the threat of and eventual military intervention eventually led to Yahya Jammeh accepting his defeat (for more details, see Birchinger et al. 2023; Witt et al. 2024).

10 While the police is a civilian law-enforcement body responsible for everyday policing, the *gendarmerie* is a militarized force with policing functions. In many former colonies, this dual structure reflected the division between civilian administrative areas and militarized zones of colonial control.

With President Adama Barrow coming into office in January 2017, the new government released a reform agenda rooted in the National Development Plan and based on five priority areas, among others a comprehensive security sector reform. A World Bank assessment revealed that the Gambian security sector had expanded to nearly 18,800 personnel which is an unusually large figure for the country's size (Dwyer 2021a). Viewing the transition from Jammeh's authoritarian rule as a post-conflict setting, the UN Peacebuilding Fund, alongside ECOWAS, the AU, the EU, and bilateral donors, pledged extensive support for SSR (Mutangadura 2020).

A comprehensive reform architecture was quickly established, yet it has been hampered by frequent leadership changes and institutional fragmentation, as donors interact through multiple entry points with overlapping ministries and agencies (Mutangadura 2020; Dwyer 2021b). While international partners have concentrated on capacity building, training, and normative reform agendas such as human rights and professional conduct, tangible improvements in security actors' behavior remain limited. Public surveys continue to report widespread mistrust and recurrent police violence (Afrobarometer 2021/2023)¹¹.

Sensitive aspects of reform have largely stalled, as citizens await a new Gambia (Hultin 2020). Accountability for past human rights violations under Jammeh remains limited, with many former loyalists still holding senior positions (Aubyn 2022; Stanislas and Chongan 2022). Structural constraints, including a shortage of qualified personnel and pervasive political recycling within the Barrow administration further slow progress (Harris and Jaw 2024). Constitutional reform has also faltered, with the failure of Barrow's new draft constitution in 2020 leaving outdated legal frameworks in place (Jaw 2020).

Downsizing the security forces, a central donor concern at the beginning of SSR efforts and aimed at reducing fiscal strain, was highly contentious. Political messaging by the new President Barrow who linked the downsizing to a re-balancing of the forces composition along ethnic lines resulted in fears of ethnic targeting, eventually risking to undermine the reform progress (Jaw 2018; ISS 2019; Dwyer 2021b). An initial moratorium has been dropped and both, the military and the police have started recruitment again. Ahead of the 2021 elections, reform momentum slowed further as Barrow sought to avoid antagonizing the military (Mutangadura 2020). Persistent mistrust has led to repeated extensions of the ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG), now widely viewed as overstaying its mandate (Witt et al. 2024). The continued reliance on Senegalese troops for Barrow's personal security underscores the incomplete nature of The Gambia's SSR transition.

To sum it up, the SSR process in The Gambia has received attention by political analysts and scholars. Shorter policy reports and papers analyze the effectiveness of the SSR implementation overall (Mutangadura 2020), the process of policy development (for the NSS development, see Badjie 2020), and (the lack of) citizen involvement (Shaqqa 2025). From a scholarly perspective, there are detailed accounts of the history of the Gambian armed forces and its role in the transition (Dwyer 2017, 2023), and thorough analysis of the external security force assistance to The Gambia (Dwyer 2021). Highlighting the importance of state-society as well as civil-military relations, Dwyer (2021a) summarizes that

“[t]he case of Gambia's political transition highlights the challenges of democratic reforms outpacing security sector reform programs. The transition has empowered many Gambians to be more politically active, but the state security forces appear uncertain how to deal with growing demonstrations, at times allowing peace-

11 Afrobarometer. 2022/2023. Round 9. Accessed 5 December, 2025. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

ful protests and at other times violently repressing them in a manner that appears similar to rule under the past regime. Their erratic responses are likely due to a lack of experience and a general uncertainty about their role in the newly democratic state. The security forces overall do not appear to want to subvert the democratic transition. Nonetheless, without reform and (re)training, they may threaten some of the recent democratic gains as well as civil-military relations more broadly.” (39–40)

The (un)making of transparency as part of the reform process plays a key role in the re-negotiation of state-society and civil-military relations, as the next section demonstrates.

4. A MAPPING: THE FUTURE SECURITY SECTOR AS IMAGINARY IN THE GAMBIA

With the National Development Plan (NDP) in place and a comprehensive Security Sector Reform (SSR) as one of the top priorities, President Adama Barrow launched the SSR Reform Initiative together with international partners, such as the AU, ECOWAS, UN and EU in September 2017. The idea was to overhaul the security sector from the past with a preventive glance into the future.

Along the process, Gambian citizens do see the necessity of SSR (e.g., Afrobarometer 2016/2018¹²; Focus Group Banjul, 29 April 2023 and Barra, 30 April 2023) but have expressed doubts about the government’s seriousness to move the reforms forward (Barchet and Birchinger 2022). At the same time, 18% of Gambian citizens do not want the current ECOWAS Military Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) to leave (Afrobarometer 2019/2021¹³). Despite criticism of ECOMIG overstaying its mandate, citizens expect them to stay until the security sector reform process is completed (e.g., Focus Group, Taibatou, 4 May 2023). But what does that mean in practice? When is such a state of completeness attained? When is a security sector fully reformed? Rather than saying something about the actual SSR process and its progress, Gambian citizens’ assessments in the above mentioned focus group discussion reveal, as we argue, a deep-seated assumption of an imagined future with a completed process, as if there is a pre-fixed picture of what a reformed security sector looks like. In the following, we explore how this pre-fixed imaginary is constructed by the Gambian government and external actors in and through the Gambian SSR process – but with little engagement of the wider public. Conducting a three-fold mapping of (1) (reform) documents, (2) involved actors, and (3) activities, we show how these partake and constitute the making of transparency but at the same time conceal and prevent an actual public conversation of how a reformed security sector should look like in the future.

4.1 Mapping of reform documents: Proliferation of strategic policy communication

The SSR process is laid out in national policies and strategies, rooted in and oriented by global, continental, and regional SSR frameworks. On that basis, the Gambian SSR process has seen the reform of existing and the drafting, validation and (partly) implementation of (new) policies. All steps have been documented publicly with press statements, workshops, social media postings, and news coverage with the intent to publicize reform efforts. This strategic communication paints the picture of a transparent SSR process with

12 Afrobarometer. 2016/2018. Round 7. Accessed 5 December, 2025. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

13 Afrobarometer, 2019/2021. Round 8. Accessed 5 December, 2025. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

a clear imaginary of a reformed security sector. While the progress in policy-making and efforts to publicize this to a wider audience are commendable, it conceals that structural change has yet to happen and requires more than policy-making. This subsection takes a first step by (1) scrutinizing the proliferation of strategic policy communication on different levels; and (2) identifying the imaginary of a reformed security sector in these documents.

Institution	Document	Reach	Function
UN-AU	UN-AU Joint Framework for Enhanced Partnership in Peace and Security (2017)	continental	orientation
UN	UN SG Report Strengthening SSR (2022)	global	orientation
AU	AU SSR Policy Framework (2013)	continental	orientation
ECOWAS	ECOWAS SSRG Policy Framework (2022)	regional	orientation
The Government of The Gambia	National Development Plan (NDP)	national	strategic document
The Government of The Gambia	National SSR Strategy	national	strategic document
The Government of The Gambia	National Security Strategy (NSS)	national	strategic document
The Government of The Gambia	National Security Policy (NSP)	national	strategic document

Table 1: Overview of SSR Policy Frameworks

Global, continental, and regional policy frameworks

The Gambian SSR process is oriented by and embedded in global, continental, and regional documents, that informed and shaped the national strategic documents, as strong alignment in language and commonalities in the formulation of principles demonstrate (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Annex I).

On a global level, the last UN Report on Strengthening SSR (2022) reiterates the priority principles for SSR processes, including “inclusive national ownership, the primacy of political solutions, ensuring governance-focused approach at all stages of reform, including assessments, planning, programming and evaluation” (1). According to the UN Report, national ownership shall “be reinforced through a complementary bottom-up approach, utilizing consultations with local communities and inclusive dialogue” and “rather than singular events, such efforts need to be central mechanisms for security sector reform through which inclusive consensus can be enhanced over time” (3). The governance-focused approach highlights the importance of working towards “transparency, responsibility, accountability, participation, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and responsiveness to the needs of the people at all levels of governance” (3). The report formulates recommendations, such as highlighting the leverage inclusive and trust-building initiatives

have on advancing political dialogue (6). All of this is geared towards the aim to “strengthen security sector governance and develop security institutions that are accountable, professional, inclusive, representative, accessible and transparent, with full respect for human rights and the rule of law, and responsive to the needs of their population” (2). These “can be built only on a bedrock of integrity, accountability and transparency” (2).

On a continental level, the African Union adopted its AU Security Sector Reform (SSR) Policy in 2013 within the wider Framework on Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (PCRD, 2006, 2024). The AU SSR Policy aligns itself with the UN SG Reports, the latest in 2022. Based on the deficit-oriented diagnosis of “weak institutional structures, lack of effective democratic control, weak democratic governance” (3), among others, the AU, in the preamble, formulates the desire of “democratic governance of a security sector that is effective, efficient and without prejudice to existing similar frameworks at national and regional levels” and recognizes “the need for African ownership” (3). Throughout the policy, there are several instances where the “peculiarities and specific requirements of security sector reform in Africa” (3), “customary security providers”, and “traditional justice actors” (10) are mentioned, pointing to a divergence from the liberal peacebuilding model from which the SSR norm cluster has emerged. The AU SSR Policy itself then goes on to define SSR and its goals as “the process by which countries formulate or re-orient the policies, structures, and capacities of institutions and groups engaged in the security sector, in order to make them more effective, efficient, and responsive to democratic control, and to the security and justice needs of the people” (6). Importantly, it denotes ownership in a plural understanding, this is local (communities), national (AU member states), regional (Regional Economic Communities) and continental (AU) ownership (6). In this sense, the policy also refers to SSR as a matter of regional integration, inspired by the AU-REC coordinating Mechanisms of 2008. With a view to national ownership, the AU SSR Policy even provides a list with ideas and examples, whom to include and not to forget in the SSR process (27) and provides a task list for civil society organizations to be involved in SSR matters (29). Despite this continental and regional alignment, each SSR process is nationally started, owned, and coordinated (9–10). In turn, external support has to follow and adhere to the nationally defined vision (10) of a reformed security sector. Borrowing from good governance principles, the AU policy formulates accountability and transparency as equally important principles for any SSR process (11). The policy elaborates on nice core elements (13–21), among others “[e]nsuring that democratic control and oversight mechanisms are enhanced and functional” (13). The AU SSR Policy reads very comprehensively, uses similar language compared to the UN SG Report (2022) when it comes to the transparency and effectiveness of security institutions but leaves comparatively more room for member states to spell out normative commitments underpinning the different core elements of SSR.

The ECOWAS SSRG Policy Framework was formally adopted in 2016, three years after the AU SSR Policy, but it was only in 2021 that the ECOWAS SSRG Policy Framework was formally launched. In the ECOWAS SSRG Policy Framework, “SSR refers to the process by which countries formulate or re-orient the policies, structures, and capacities of institutions and groups engaged in the security sector, in order to make them more effective, efficient, accountable and responsive to democratic control, and to the security and justice needs of the people” (8). While this formulation is almost identical with the wording in the AU SSR Policy, the ECOWAS SSRG Policy adds the adjective “accountable” to the wish list of a reformed security sector. For achieving these goals, the policy continues “[i]t requires separation of powers, a participatory and inclusive approach involving citizens through their legally and regularly chosen representatives in decision-making processes, management

and control of State activities and function in the Security Sector” (8). In its understanding of democratic governance as a key component of conflict prevention, the ECOWAS SSRG Policy sees security sector reform as one key mechanism, with the objective to make the security sector “efficient, effective, responsive and responsible to democratic control” (9) and “accountable, transparent and participatory” (9). The policy highlights the importance of “African and West African solidarity and good neighborhood” as well as “horizontal partnerships and South-South cooperation” (10) as core principles in support of “respect for national sovereignty” (10). The adoption of the policy is seen as “an expression of West African ownership” (11) and highlights that any SSRG activity must be “on the basis of a national decision” and “tailored to the needs, histories, culture, social and political context of the applicable States” (11). With these proclamations, the policy pronounces certain un-negotiable core principles while at the same time leaving the responsibility to the member states to spell out concrete reform agendas. In section III, the policy then spells out ten “essential features”, comprising, among others, “[t]he involvement of customary authorities and community-based security and justice providers” and “[t]he effective involvement of Civil Society Organizations and the media” (13).

It remains unclear whether these building blocks that are subsequently spelled out in much detail are a proposal for SSR or mandatory elements for each member state undergoing a SSR reform process. What stands out is the language of support rather than a language of implementation, that is used in the section on the implementation mechanism. That very section spells out the roles of three actors: these are the ECOWAS Commission, the member states, and civil society organizations including the media. For the ECOWAS Commission, the policy seeks roles such as “to build capacity”, “to undertake aggressive sensitization and communication”, “to coordinate”, “to assist”, “to contribute”, “to support”, “to partner” (23–4) – clear coordinating and assisting roles. For the member states, the policy rather uses language of obligation with wordings such as “to provide”, “to establish”, “to ensure”, “to design and implement” – putting member states under the obligation as “the primary providers of security and justice services for their citizens [...] for formulating, designing, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, leading and funding SSRG programmes” (24). For civil society organizations and the media, the policy “acknowledges the positive role played by CSOs and the media” and sets out to “engage CSOs and the media” to, among others, “promote transparency and accountability in SSRG programmes”, “promote and encourage dialogue”, and “contribute to the work of other institutions in charge of overseeing the controlling security sector institutions” (25–6). In sum, the distribution of responsibilities is clearly spelled out: The ECOWAS Commission is there to enable and make possible, the member states shall be those in the lead designing and implementing SSRs and the civil society organizations are there to participate, dialogue, and “promote transparency and accountability in SSRG programmes” (26).

Based on these global, continental, and regional documents, the imaginary of a reformed security sector appears to have two main foci that become apparent in two word clusters: The first word cluster that we call “PEOPLE” includes national ownership, people-orientation as well as the adjectives “inclusive” and “responsive” as further descriptors of a reformed security sector. The second word cluster that we call “TRUST” includes the adjectives effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable. It is these two word clusters that we will now trace at the national level.

National policies

This imaginary of a reformed security sector, namely based on citizens’ security needs and with the characteristics of being effective, efficient, transparent, and accountable, as

stipulated in the global, continental and regional frameworks is continuously repeated in the various Gambian national documents – yet without providing more substance, and without spelling out concrete steps and action or communicating how these aims are to be achieved (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Annex II).

The new government under President Adama Barrow embarked on an ambitious reform trajectory laid out in the National Development Plan (NDP, 2018–2021), later followed by the Recovery Focused National Development Plan (RF-NDP, 2023–2027). The NDP and the subsequent RF-NDP serve as the main strategic reference frameworks for government action. For the first two years in office, seven priorities are identified, among others “Security sector reforms and creating a security apparatus fully subordinate to civilian authority, respectful of human rights and attuned to international standards and conventions” (25; 200). The high priority is explained by the fact that “for the citizens the state was the foremost source of insecurity” (187, 195, and footnotes 28 and 31). In the NDP with over 400 pages, security sector reform, however, appears only four times. In the Foreword, President Barrow declares to have “embarked upon a robust security sector reform process, aimed at bringing the security services fully under civilian democratic control, ensuring that the force’s structures and manpower are appropriate for our national security needs, and that the men and women in our armed and uniformed services can play a meaningful and positive role in national development” (7). While the initial NDP limits itself to naming SSR as a broad priority without spelling out details at all, the subsequent secondary RF-NDP continues to emphasize SSR as “a top priority of Government”, and provides considerably more substance, including white paper priority areas and roadmaps, even detailing planning on activity-level. This is a notable contrast but might point to the progress made with detailed work plans that have been developed since 2018. Still, the RF-NDP acknowledges that “the security sector reform is still work in progress” (75).

In preparation of the SSR process, the Gambian government together with UNDP started an assessment detailing the reform needs in 2017. For that purpose, the Steering Committee and Project Board, including government ministers (Interior, Justice, Foreign Affairs), the chief justice, UN Resident Representative, the ECOWAS and EU ambassadors commissioned a 27-member Technical Working Group (TWG) to draft the SSR Assessment Report in 2017 (The Republic of The Gambia 2017). The report maps over 78 pages full of reform needs, including situational and contextual analyses, institutional assessments and security needs of different stakeholders. Most notably, this report serves as the basis of all future SSR related processes, activities, policies and documents. Bearing the crucial relevance of this document in mind, it is quite significant, that the report borrows from the UN definition on SSR and does not mention the AU and ECOWAS SSR policy frameworks at all (2). In line with the UN definition of SSR, the report aims “at making recommendations for the changes required to make them more professional, effective, accountable, and responsive to the security and justice needs of the citizenry and operating within the framework of good governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights and international humanitarian laws.” (The Republic of The Gambia 2017, 3). The future reformed security sector is imagined to reflect “oversight and accountability” (40), “accountability and control measures” (69), “more transparency, dialogue and sensitization” (40, 56). It is on the basis of this assessment report that the National SSR Strategy, the National Security Strategy and the National Security Policy were developed to further spell out the future security sector.

One recommendation of the aforementioned report was to draft the first ever National Security Policy (NSP) that was eventually launched in May 2019. According to President Barrow, the policy “is an overarching policy document that aims at streamlining mandates, roles and responsibilities of Security Institutions [...] and will engender a clear division of la-

bour" (iii). First of all, the NSP is rich in deficit analysis. In the NSP, for example, the security sector with its institutions is imagined as an opposite to the past: "[S]ecurity was designed to focus on the protection of the political and economic interests of the elite as opposed to meeting the needs of the citizenry" (11). Therefore, "crucial to the success of the Gambia's new NSP, is popular ownership and changed perceptions that long gone are the days when the security sector was an instrument in the hands of political actors who utilized it to deny Gambians of their fundamental rights, and for self-aggrandizement of the highest order" (viii). It continues: "In the last two decades, The Gambia witnessed saw blatant abuse of Gambians and use of the state security apparatus primarily for political repression and self-interest" (1) – "a security apparatus that was not oriented to meet the needs of the people" (12). Instead, "a culture of impunity" persisted in the light of "widespread human rights abuse" (12). How then does the National Security Policy imagine the country's security institutions in the future instead?

Aiming to "reverse negative public perceptions [...] and regain public trust", the NSP sets out the aim for "a civilian-controlled security sector founded on democratic institutions, norms and processes to promote human rights and the rule of law" (1). SSR is "to ensure efficient and effective governance and oversight of the security system as well as to ensure the definition of mandates and delineation of competencies of security forces, services and institutions" (14). This shall be achieved with an NSP "predicated on popular participation, and international best practices" (1), "a transparent and accountable government" (1), as well as national core values (2). The 17 guiding principles include, for instance, "human security that is responsive to the security and justice needs of The Gambian people" and "the adoption of international principles of transparency and inclusiveness" (14–16).

The NSP then provides an analysis of the major threats and vulnerabilities before introducing the governance structure of the security apparatus (23–25):

- National Security Council (NSC) – chaired by president, "highest authority for providing strategic guidance and direction in national security issues" (23)
- Office of National Security (ONS) – responsible for managing the SSR process together with statutory organs

The eight main security institutions include The Gambia Armed Forces (GAF), The Gambia Police Force (GPF), State Intelligence Services (SIS), The Gambia Immigration Department (GID), Drug Law Enforcement Agency (DLEAG), The Gambia Fire and Rescue Services (GFRS), The Gambia Prison Services, as well as The Gambia Revenue Authority (26–33).

The NSP details an oversight and review mechanism, tasking all branches (legislature, judiciary, and executive) but also independent bodies to oversee the security institutions. Referring to "the spirit of the Constitutive Act of the African Union", the NSP "empowers the office of the ombudsman as a designated civil institution to investigate complaints from the public and service members, and to monitor compliance of the security sector" (38). Equally the NSP calls upon multiple partners to collaborate in the future, among others, the NSP "encourages CSOs to play a positive role in enhancing security sector responsiveness to the security and justice needs of the state and people within the ambit of the law" (40). To implement the NSP, the Office of National Security was tasked to develop a National Security Strategy (NSS).

The National Security Strategy (NSS, 2020) is seen as "the cardinal point of policy making", including national security and economic development as "closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing concepts" (1). In this role, the strategy "is intended to carry out in-depth systemic reforms in order to ensure that there is no vacuum which can be exploited to destabilize the country" (viii). In fact, the NSS mirrors in much length the NSP, when it identifies the malfunctioning security sector as the reason for "eroded government capacity [...], slowed

down economic development efforts, and affected core national values” (5). For security institutions to contribute to the implementation of the NSP, the NSS suggests to “enhance the capacity of security institutions” and aim for “properly structured institutions” (15). While all security related policies have so far remained mostly on a level of formulating lofty demands on a reformed security sector, the NSS for the first time breaks SSR process down into these six strategic steps:

- “Restructure line ministries, to enable them execute their oversight functions over their respective security institutions”.
- “Strengthen and empower the Office of National Security to enable it adequately coordinate national security”.
- “Develop synergy between security sector institutions through building and maintaining institutional and multi-agency cooperation”.
- “Establish and strengthen a Joint Operations Centre to coordinate multi-agency operations”.
- “Establish a framework to promote information and intelligence sharing among security sector institutions”.
- “Ensure continuous training of security sector personnel and provision of resources/infrastructure/equipment” (19).

On the basis of the 2017 SSR Assessment Report, the government adopted The Gambia’s Security Sector Reform Strategy (SSRS, 2020–2024). While all other documents portrayed so far serve as framework that guide the Gambian security sector reform process, the SSRS in fact is ‘the’ key reform document on a national level. On 37 pages, the Gambian government details its plans to reform its security sector. The document identifies five principles priority areas and spells out reform steps for the respective security institutions (v). While words such as “future” or “reformed” security sector are not used in the document, the wording clearly alludes to how a future reformed security sector is imagined, namely that reforms “would cultivate an effective, robust professional, apolitical, accountable, transparent and responsive sector in line with international best practices” (v) and an “accountable, effective and efficient security sector” (3).

While the SSRS echoes implicitly global, continental, and regional policy frameworks, it does not refer to the UN, AU, and ECOWAS policy frameworks directly. In distinction to these larger policy frameworks, the national SSRS takes five identified priority areas as a starting point and pins down responsibilities, objectives, outcomes, outputs and activities for each priority area in much detail. The SSRS reads like a To-Do list for the government, security institutions, and international partners, to tick off in the years to come, going down to the activity level and providing a clear road map towards the imaginary of a “effective, robust professional, apolitical, accountable, transparent and responsive sector” (3) – an imaginary that is constructed in all reviewed policy documents.

4.2 Mapping of actors: Web and diffusion of responsibilities

Security provision at its core is a state duty. This monopoly is blurred when states receive security force assistance from external and/or non-state actors. Presenting in itself a complex task, security provision, thus, involves a plethora of actors. While the scope of this working paper does not allow to discuss each and every actor in detail, the landscape of security providers in The Gambia can be characterized by two main features:

First, in terms of domestic actors, one observes a divide between “the reformers” and “the (to be) reformed” instead of a more unified collective endeavor. Concretely, the Government

of The Gambia as well as its Office of National Security describe themselves as willing to reform and with the steering wheel in their hands as “the reformers” and depict immediate security providers, such as the Gambian Police Force, the Gambian Armed Forces, and the Gambian Immigration Department as the entities with deficits, hence “the ones (to be) reformed”.¹⁴ While “the reformers” hold powerful positions in steering the SSR process and in performing oversight functions, “the (to be) reformed” are put on the spot – both in terms of their shortcomings and as targets of reform efforts. While in policy documents “the nation”, “the citizenry”, “the Gambian people” as a whole is often made reference of, the actual security institutions as well as the legacies of the past are identified as reasons for reform needs. The reform process, therefore, is not understood as a collective journey but the documents show clear division of roles between “the reformers” (implicitly, who know better) and “the (to be) reformed” (implicitly, who must undergo change). What seems to be a blame game reflects a well known dynamic wherein newly elected governments point to the shortcomings of the outgoing government and portraying itself as the “fixer”. However, this approach puts in danger the intentional and often referred to reference to a “new” Gambia full of “unity” and without divisions.

Entity	Status/Role
Government of The Gambia	Strategic Lead
Office of National Security with National Security Adviser	Strategic Implementation Oversight
Gambia Police Force	Under Reform
Gambian Armed Forces	Under Reform
Gambian Immigration	Under Reform

Table 2: Overview of National State Entities in the Gambian SSR Process

Second, while security provision is a usually inherently domestic task, the SSR process brought in external actors who to a varying degree are equally present and/or involved in the security sphere in The Gambia. This multiplicity of external actors carries distinct, yet often several roles at the same time. For distinguishing the different actors, we label them according to their main roles, namely funding, implementing or advisory roles. In terms of funding, each actor comes with their own funding priorities and needs to disperse funds, mostly through consultancies and trainings but also equipment (see next section on activities). In terms of implementation, working within their respective logics and with their established domestic networks, double and parallel structures evolve despite coordination efforts. In terms of advisory, the involvement of external actors with funds at their hands translates into hierarchical dependencies between domestic and external actors and agenda-setting from the outside (see Tchie et al. 2025). External actors that then eventually (contribute to) shape the SSR agenda, in practice challenge national and local ownership – despite efforts of localization. Lastly, with the different external actors being present in The Gambia, one observes not only a competition for funds among domestic actors, both government and civil society, but also a diffusion of the sense of responsibility. Government and civil society ac-

¹⁴ With this binary we reflect how reform dynamic present itself in speech acts, documents and the participation in reform activities. However, we acknowledge that this binary can be oversimplifying for some cases at the same time. For example, the government with its ministries is not only “reformer” but equally under reform. Another example are high-ranking military officials that are political appointees and might rather be counted to the “reformers” rather than to “the reformed”. We thank Franziska Ehler for pointing us to this.

tors rely on external funds and coordinate the work programmes with the different actors. In that process, priorities, deliverables, and outcomes are negotiated. If this is done with several external actors, as can be observed in The Gambia, we see a compartmentalization of responsibility. During the SSR process, it becomes less and less clear who can be held accountable for what reform step. Two dynamics appear: one, shortcomings and failures are often externalized by attributing responsibility to “others”, meaning other domestic but also external actors. Two, an atmosphere of not-knowing arises: if actors are asked about progress, outcomes or the status quo reform steps, the answer is often “I don’t know. The UN has been doing something on that....” or “Not sure who is responsible for that” or “I think there was a training once”. This clearly points to a loosening grip on coordination and overview on behalf of those supposed to steer the SSR process.

Entity	Presence	Role
African Union (AU)	ACHPR	observing
Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)	ECOWAS Permanent Representative ECOWAS National Office ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia (ECOMIG) ECOWAS Commission ECOWAS Stabilization Fund	funding and partly implementing
United Nations Office for West Africa and Sahel (UNOWAS)		advisory and implementing
UN Development Programme (UNDP)	SSR Programme	funding
European Union (EU)	Project “Restoring Trust”	funding and partly implementing
GIZ	EPSAO Project Police Programm ECOWAS Stabilisation Fund	implementing
DCAF	National Office with trainings, workshops, study reports based on the SSR toolkit	implementing
Bilateral partners, such as Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America	Military training programs abroad, such as staff officer courses	implementing
Consultancy firms or individuals		advisory

Table 3: Overview of Involved Reform Actors in the Gambian SSR Process

In sum, this web of actors diffuses and compartmentalizes responsibilities. This runs the risk of an individualized and subjective sentiment of progress and reform. For the public, this diffusion and compartmentalization of responsibilities result in a blurred picture where transparency and responsibility are lost and (potential) reform progress becomes invisible.

4.3 Mapping of activities in types: The reform bubble and the missing public

In moving the SSR process forward, activities of various forms take place in The Gambia, occasionally several on the same day at the same time on similar topics. While these activities and events are to foster stakeholder dialogue, participation, and ownership, the relevant stakeholders by now know each other and, together with the involved civil society organizations, there seems to be a “reform bubble”, while the wider public is missing entirely. Outreach and media briefings intend to engage but miss large parts of Gambian citizens. Acknowledging that not every individual shows interest or wants/needs to be involved, focus group interlocutors have expressed the wish to understand better and to be taken along in what are fundamental national reform processes after decades of authoritarian rule (e.g. Focus Group, Taibatou, 4 May 2023; Focus Group, Yundum, 12 May 2023).

To better grasp the various activities as part of the SSR process, we distinguish between four types:

First, in implementing the various policies, the involved actors are engaged with drafting, as well as the revision, validation, and adoption of various bills (see section on documents). In that context, not only government actors are involved, but in input and validation workshops, civil society and external actors are involved, too. This ties up considerable capacities in ministries and civil society organizations who attend those workshop rounds for reasons of input and staying up to date. At the same time, those workshops convene and constitute the “reform bubble” where one meets colleagues, has lunch together, chats over new project ideas. This goes hand in hand with receiving per diems and usually takes places at pricy hotels or the national convention center. For the general public, this is a rather closed-up space behind security checks and adds to the prejudice of “they only meet and talk”¹⁵.

A similar dynamic can be observed in the second cluster of activities, namely the dominant activity of SSR that centers capacity building in the form of trainings. In The Gambia, this has involved media training, military training, sensitization activities (e.g. Jawo 2019). The plethora of trainings are rarely followed up on with regard to learning yields. Also, facilitators often come from Global North institutions, even though this slowly changes. To what extent those trainings in effect trigger/change long established norms of work culture or societal norms how security actors are embedded in their communities, remains questionable (see also Müller 2020; Kohl 2025). At the same time, as described for the policy process, trainings and workshop activities have for long created a reform bubble that stands apart from the general public. This reform bubble has tended to exclude rather than include and has created walls around the SSR process that are only slowly being teared down (see for example Sonko 2025).

Third, and beyond the training and policy development as part of SSR, there are speech acts, such as (joint) press briefings, communiqués, speeches, and reports (for example, ONS 2017, UNDP 2020, ONS 2023 and 2024). With the aim to raise awareness and understanding among the Gambian population about the ongoing SSR process, the media and parliamentary briefings share information on the SSR process with the intention of providing “right and accurate information” (ONS 2023). Intended to create transparency and accountability as well as to take along the public, those speech acts are carefully curated bits of information that pick up on policy formulations such as the imagination of an effective, transparent, and accountable security sector. Rather than involving the public in

¹⁵ Focus Groups, community members, Basse (Pro-Barro constituency) and Bwiam (Pro-Jammeh constituency) The Gambia, 10 and 12 March 2022.

the process (SSR as a process) and extending an invitation to add to the public debate of SSR reform, those speech acts rather describe the envisioned end state of the SSR as if the reform process was at its end already (SSR as “as if – imaginary”). The golden rule in the Gambian government’s political strategic communication seems to be ‘the more communication and publication, the more transparent and better’. This is understandable after two decades of untransparent and unpredictable security provision and the international incentives for “catch up” development. However, this not only increases the pressure to produce what is not there yet but also, strategic policy communication alone should not be mistakenly seen as the silver bullet for improved security provision or benchmark for reform progress in itself (see also the case of Omar Badjie in the introduction).

Activity type	Examples	Objective
Policy making and implementation	Drafting, revision, validation, adoption of bills and implementation plans	Development of national policy frameworks
Speech Acts	(Joint) press statements and briefings (e.g., AU-ECOWAS-UNOWAS) Communiqués (e.g., AU PSC) Speeches (e.g., UNOWAS) Reports (base-line studies, assessment and evaluation reports, field mission reports)	Presentation of progress, information for the public, accountability vis-à-vis funding organizations
Capacity Building	Workshops (e.g. ECOWAS SSRG Workshop) Trainings (e.g. DCAF Media Training, Military training domestically and abroad)	“As a key player in public oversight, media is instrumental in holding government institutions accountable, transparent and responsive to the needs of the public.” (Jawo 2019)
Equipment and infrastructure	Handover of equipment (e.g., cars, police equipment) Rehabilitation or construction of infrastructure (e.g., model police stations)	Demonstrate progress

Table 4: Overview of Types of Activity in the Gambian SSR Process

Fourth, a material side of SSR are activities that involve the procurement and/or handing over of equipment or the rehabilitation or construction of infrastructure. In the case of The Gambia, footage of the ceremonies handing over equipment, such as a criminal detection kit, police protection gear or IT equipment are posted on Facebook with the ECOWAS and/or GIZ logo, sometimes high-level bureaucrats or even ministers participate in these

events. Rehabilitation or construction of infrastructure, such as the (model) police stations that were refurbished by the GIZ-ECOWAS Stabilisation Fund, are testimony for selective betterment of material infrastructure conditions. While the respective equipment and infrastructure might be needed, they come as isolated objects but with the ambition as if there was already an effective, transparent and accountable security sector that only needed new equipment or one new criminal detection kit. Having said this, the equipment has not come as reward for already made progress. There is a cognitive dissonance that is rooted in unmet expectations, as if the handing over of equipment (celebrated exactly as such) would reform the security sector. Instead, it produces another moment for glossy pictures, making the reformer look good.

This critique might sound hypocritical and cynical. Of course, one can argue that all of these activities are pieces of a larger puzzle, and they surely are. However, acknowledging long-standing practices within police units and stations in addition to the dire payment system for police officers and a skewed incentive structure around police check-points, the question is whether the aforementioned activities can effectively address these in light of the imagined effective, transparent, and accountable security sector.

4.4 *The “as if” imaginary uncontested on paper: The future security sector*

Summarizing the mapping exercise, two main observations emerge: Policy documents, actors, and activities all honor the age of transparency, repeating the imaginary of an effective, transparent and accountable security sector like a mantra. This imaginary is performed, enacted, and imitated on a repeating basis as if the goal was clear without any doubt. This performance is not yielding tangible results, though. Neither is it clear how these formulations (effective, transparent, accountable) translate into practice because they have never been spelled out, discussed, operationalized and agreed upon publicly. Therefore, the promises of a reformed security sector do not become tangible in the everyday life of the wider public, where citizens want to report incidents at the police station, are stopped at police check points every other 500m, and where police officers lack fuel to use the recently procured cars. And still, SSR is not pure fiction but does take place in all the aforementioned forms, including policy documents, actors, and activities at various levels.

Two possible explanations for this conundrum emerge from the mapping: First, there is a divergence of motivations and incentives between the different levels. In order to not put off one side, these differences are concealed and not addressed. Second, the compartmentalization of responsibilities leads to a diffusion and unmaking of transparency. This situation can easily be exploited to intentionally conceal slow/no progress.

In sum, the explicit goal of creating transparent, effective and accountable security institutions is consistently upheld and performed in rhetoric and actions, yet this imaginary gets visible cracks as it remains a fixed but shallow end point of SSR at the horizon. This endpoint, however, remains imagined and far if not filled with content in the form of actual and structural changes that reflect and speak to citizens’ security needs.

5. DISCUSSION: ILLUSIONARY/PERFORMATIVE OR CONTESTABLE/DELIBERATIVE TRANSPARENCY?

“We live in the information age, evident in the fact that we can no longer shield ourselves from information. It is not so much the overwhelming usefulness of information that defines this era, but rather the sheer, unmanageable flood of it.”¹⁶ (Frank 1998, 49)

In this paper, we employed the conceptual lens of transparency to frame the reform of security institutions as an “as if” imaginary. Based on a mapping exercise of the SSR process in The Gambia, we delineate illusory/performative from contestable/deliberative transparency and discuss what this means for SSR processes and for the building of peace in post-conflict and post-authoritarian societies. In a nutshell, the Gambian SSR reform process illustrates how the imaginary of a reformed security sector often remains a political illusion/fiction. The performative production of transparency – through proliferation of policies, press releases, workshops, and trainings – does not translate into palpable results for the wider public nor does it engage citizens on their security needs and imagination of their security futures.

While the different SSR policy documents are anchored in the shared experience of a more than 20 years regime ruled with an iron fist (Erfahrungsraum), they coin the (political) imaginary of a reformed security sector (Erwartungshorizont). This imaginary is oriented by deficits in the past, namely the lack of transparency and accountability, and charts a path into the future that is closely connected to the idea of linear progress, as such inscribing itself into liberal ideas of effective, accountable, and transparent security institutions. What follows from this is the task for the Gambian government to manage expectations (politics of expectations) how to get from the deficit security sector from the past to realizing the declared ambition and imagined reformed security sector. This ambition all too often carries the footprint of external standards, so that it is the implicit assumption that the “not yet” (the deficit) will need to mirror European security sector institutions in the future. As we demonstrated in the mapping, the Gambian government approaches the crafted imaginary of a reformed security sector and the accompanying expectations with the help of transparency. However, we find that the Gambian government together with its international partners creates an illusory/performative transparency that suggests that the path to and the imagination of a reformed security sector is a clearly sketched, visible and agreed upon one (as if phenomenon). This is not the case. Instead, the different publics (the reformer, the reformed, the wider public) undergo technocratic steps of SSR (technocratization), but remain disconnected. As we demonstrate, the wider public, in particular, does not only not partake in and benefit from the SSR process but as a result also retreats from politics and loses trust in government institutions. In addition, while claiming full political will, the government’s will to reform remains questioned (depoliticization). Instead of making the SSR process transparent, we observe the making of intransparency where actual goals and ambitions and the steps to attain these remain obscure and intransparent, because empty word shells (effective, transparent) are on repeat at the detriment of a deliberative process where structural and societal questions of security, security demands and security institutions are addressed and negotiated. As a result, we argue for the need of a deliberate national process that allows for contestable futures of security and peace in the country which we term deliberate/contestable transparency.

¹⁶ German original: „Wir leben im Informationszeitalter und merken es daran, dass wir uns vor Information nicht mehr retten können. Nicht der überwältigende Nutzen der Information, sondern ihre nicht mehr zu bewältigende Flut charakterisiert die Epoche“ (Frank 1998, 49). Authors’ translation.

With these observations, we draw on existing scholarship and data on SSR more generally and The Gambian case in particular, for example the Afrobarometer data and Luqman Shaqa's (2025) observation on citizen dialogues in the context of the SSR process. The assumed effect of generating transparency "from above" is based on a mechanism reminiscent of the trickle-down effect. The promise is that institutional openness will "trickle down" to the level of public perception and foster trust among the population. This is the logic of the making of transparency through policy documents and trainings as seen in the Gambian SSR process. However, if public engagement remains at the surface or is limited to the validation and publication of policy documents, the government will lose rather than build citizens' trust, as Luqman Shaqa finds:

"Unlike the transitional justice reform and the constitutional review process, which garnered significant public engagement, The Gambia's Security Sector Reform (SSR) has not received similar attention. As a result, there has been less public discourse on and scrutiny of the SSR process. The limited public knowledge and understanding of the SSR process might be attributed to several factors, including the official secrecy that often characterizes the security sector, the lack of interest from CSOs in the SSR process, the piecemeal nature of SSR implementation in The Gambia, poor dissemination of information about the reforms, and the absence of robust public engagement by the State, its institutions, international partners, the media, and CSOs." (Shaqa 2025, 4)

As one of the results, slowly regained trust is being put at risk, as the recent Afrobarometer survey shows that, since 2018, public trust in key state institutions such as the presidency, parliament, judiciary, and police has declined significantly. At the same time, perceptions of corruption have risen sharply. While religious leaders (80%), the military (70%), and traditional authorities (61%) continue to enjoy high levels of trust, many citizens view the presidency (49%), parliament (46%), police (43%), and judiciary (43%) as largely corrupt. 81% of respondents report that corruption in the country increased over the past year – more than double the figure from 2018. Only 40% believe they can report corruption without fear of retaliation – an 18-percentage-point drop. Moreover, 86% of Gambians believe the government is not doing enough to fight corruption – a dramatic 49-percentage-point increase compared to 2018 (Afrobarometer 2024/2025)¹⁷. This development clearly demonstrates that transparency cannot be achieved solely through providing access to policy documents, technical measures or symbolic communication. In other words, accountability cannot be replaced with transparency promises. It must be tangible and credible to the primordial public as Osaghae defined – otherwise, it remains an empty promise that further undermines trust in state institutions.

With policy documents such as the AU SSR Policy, a narrative of progress is produced and reproduced – one that frames the future of The Gambia's security sector as a linear trajectory toward stability, professionalism, and good governance. The deficit-oriented diagnosis of the AU's SSR policy reveals how the language of progress narratives is mobilized, relying on assumptions about future developments while merely performing the appearance of an inevitable, concrete future reality. Within this framework, emphasis typically lies on identifying the absence or distortion of democratic and market-oriented elements across different regions of the world. Although the SSR strategy sets out a clear roadmap and discloses the principles guiding its reform agenda, it simultaneously reflects global, continen-

¹⁷ Afrobarometer. 2024/2025. Round 10. Accessed 5 December, 2025. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

tal, and regional political frameworks. This raises the question: is SSR essentially a package of conditionalities or roadmaps to which international support is tied, or do equivalent constellations of priorities exist within the Gambian population and political leadership itself? In the context of SSR in The Gambia, the question of transparency reveals how it is negotiated across different public spheres. Communication among reform actors within the government largely occurs within an insulated reform bubble – one that constructs a discursive reality aligned with the civic public, that is, with state-institutional actors and international partners. The primordial public, by contrast – rooted in everyday social and local contexts – remains excluded from this discursive space, which is primarily constituted through workshop settings and bureaucratic interactions.

Transparency thus becomes an inner-bureaucratic ritual. “Right and accurate information” (ONS 2023) circulates among the same set of actors, generating a shared interpretation of progress within this circle, without ever reaching the social realities that lie beyond the reform bubble. Between these two publics, an atmosphere of not-knowing emerges – one in which being informed is performed rather than substantively shared. In this context, anthropologist Niklas Hultin (2013, 47) draws on the notion of opacity, extending its meaning beyond mere intransparency. What is at stake is not the complete absence of knowledge or visibility, but rather an uncertainty regarding the parameters within which one operates—since the end user or client can only access a fragment of the process. Following Ekeh (1975), this dynamic not only reproduces the colonial demarcation between two publics but also highlights how such distinctions are continually reinforced. In this light, policy roadmaps such as the SSR Strategy appear as forms of information so seemingly complete that they present themselves as self-evident (Hetherington 2011, 6–7).

As a narrative, SSR functions here as a kind of a “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck 1979 [2022]). Deeply anchored in the past and its “space of experience,” it is sustained by political actors, international partners, and institutions, all oriented toward a “not-yet” that is imagined to be achieved through reform, training, and institutional modernization. By emphasizing standards, benchmarks (such as transparency), and best practices, the narrative delineates which expectations of action and development are deemed legitimate, and prescribes the proper mode of “modernization” (politics of expectation). Appadurai et al. (2013) articulate it convincingly when they argue that people around the world have different access to practices of future-making (*ibid.*, 289–290). The ability to imagine security futures is confined to a specific reformist or elite bubble, since concepts and interpretive frameworks – such as transparency – play a pivotal role in shaping social change processes.

Seen in this light, the SSR reform documents can be understood fundamentally as a theory about the conditions under which social change on a global scale is expected to converge toward a higher level of key public goods—goods that are to be secured through the deliberate diffusion of specific instruments (Appadurai et al. 2013). The production of transparency regarding reform initiatives in the security sector constitutes one such public good. Within the Gambian SSR initiative, we observe this instrumentality through a steady proliferation of strategy papers, stakeholder forums, workshops, exercises, and roundtable discussions, in which the Gambian government, together with external actors, collectively works toward the good of transparency within the SSR process.

The proliferation of documents and strategies acts as a medium for powerful actors who can influence the expectations of other actors. Sophie Frediani (2021, 7) describes how the SSR process in The Gambia has led to important achievements that have prompted the government to adopt an ambitious SSR transformation agenda. As part of this, it adopted a series of overarching policy and strategic documents. These include the National Secu-

ity Policy (June 2019) and its subordinate strategies, i.e. the National Security Strategy (2020–2035) and the SSR Strategy (2020–2024), both of which were published at the end of November 2020.

In the recurrent use of normative buzzwords such as “effective,” “transparent,” or “accountable” (see policy documents but also DCAF 2019), practices often lack substantive elaboration. What emerges is not an empirically grounded framework but rather a normative frame of reference or a series of “dream papers” (Appel 2017, 307) that articulate political and institutional order. The central concern, therefore, is the relationship between information and the imagination of a particular social order. For Appadurai et al. (2013), modernization theory remains “nothing if not predictive” (ibid., 222). Such visions of the future, in turn, generate their own reality by introducing assumptions that extend beyond empirical evidence.

In this regard, Maggie Dwyer notes that President Barrow’s public statements suggest that while the reform of the security forces constitutes an important political priority, the government’s rhetoric appears stronger than its actions (Dwyer 2021b, 635). Thus, a policy does not merely formulate a goal from a particular positionality – one aligned with the liberal script – but also produces a structuring order of power, knowledge, and political practice that guides the actions and decisions of the actors involved (Graeber 2022, 24).

6. CONCLUSION

This working paper has examined the SSR process in The Gambia through the lens of transparency. By exploring the (un)making of (in)transparency, we found that too often the making of transparency remains confined to words, while action is lacking. In other words, the Gambian government, national stakeholders, and international partners have put a focus on developing a plethora of policy and strategy documents, yet little attention has been paid to a process centered on citizens’ security needs. Bearing in mind the country’s violent history and fractured civil-military relationship, the SSR process has not enabled a public discourse partaking in the negotiating of the future security landscape of the country. In conclusion, we argue that the publication and proliferation of strategy documents is not enough to demonstrate political will to reform and to (re-)create trust and public ownership of thorough reforms. Rather it produces illusionary/performative transparency at the detriment of a publicly owned contestable and negotiable future vision.

It is on this basis that we propose the distinction of illusionary/performative transparency and contestable/deliberative transparency for making future vision(s) of security negotiable. Rather than pursuing transparency for its own sake (or merely to satisfy international partners) we must ask who actually engages with these documents and to what end. Transparency should not be treated as a panacea. Instead, the role of external actors must be understood as enabling spaces in which locally grounded security and development solutions can emerge, rather than occupying those spaces themselves. These findings build on and speak to the second generation SSR scholarship that has already problematized the reduction of SSR to a technocratic process (Jackson 2018) and paved the way for calling for a more relational approach to SSR that puts human security needs center-stage. Finally, our findings call for contestable politics: raising citizens’ awareness is not sufficient but open and inclusive debates, for example through citizen dialogues, about citizens’ security needs, what a reformed security sector should look like and whose security it ultimately serves are required (see also Shaqa 2025).

Reflecting on the research and writing process of this working paper, we acknowledge the

coloniality of knowledge, power, and the inherent hierarchies with respect to how core liberal ideas on transparency and security travel and are uncritically transplanted from Western political thought and policy practice to, in this case, the Gambian context. Embedding our analysis into such strands of literature risks to equally contribute to this. We also acknowledge the limitations of a single case study that is primarily based on the analysis of strategy documents and observational data gathered during field research. In our case, information was readily available, eventually a valuable indication of increasing openness and the institutionalization of documentation practices. However, the mere provision of information does not automatically create transparency, nor does the existence of documents guarantee their actual implementation. This is what we stumbled over when comparing the documents with how SSR is being 'run' on the ground. Despite our observations and claims, our intention is not an evaluation exercise of the Gambian SSR process, neither to call for the full disclosure of all intelligence information to everyone and the inclusion of every citizen in national security scenario planning. Rather, we acknowledge that access to and interpretation of information are always situated and subjective. Individual exposure, selective attention, and diverse understandings of what constitutes "security" or "reform progress" are part of how (in)transparency is made in practice. To end, what we do want to emphasize is the relevance of understanding transparency as a relational construct and of taking seriously the security experiences of citizens, be they active parts of the security sector or be they under the protection of national security institutions. It is only then that transparency becomes a productive two-way street in the re-negotiation of state-society and civil-military relations in post-conflict contexts.

Transparency is often regarded as a remedy not only against sources of violence, insecurity, or oppression, but also, as in the Gambian case, against the abuses/devastations by state security organs. Like the actors and activities within security sector reform initiatives that so frequently invoke transparency, it itself stands in a dialectical relationship to SSR – as a permanent structural feature of it. The task of researching the process of SSR in The Gambia, or similar reform and development efforts elsewhere, is therefore also the task of researching transparency itself.

Future research should thus aim to better understand how transparency actually operates at the micro level, how it is perceived, interpreted, and translated into everyday practices by individuals and communities. Theoretically and methodologically, this can mean, on the one hand, using ethnography as a particular anthropological method and centering everyday and vernacular accounts in researching security and transparency. On the other hand, this can mean an interdisciplinary research agenda to investigate SSR reform processes beyond political sciences and anthropological accounts, but to equally include psychologists, or criminologists. Conceptually, International Relations as a discipline should explicitly study transparency as a distinct concept, rather than following the assumption that observable diversity merely conceals fundamentally similar processes. This means that reform actors should not simply assume that their own concerns necessarily reflect those of the people. Instead, one should recognize that there could be real differences in perspectives, experiences and objectives. This also entails examining what meanings, expectations, and power relations are associated with transparency or how information circulates or to whom it is made accessible. Derived from that we could come to further conclusions what social or political dynamics transparency thereby generates.

Not least the story of Omar Badjie – as introduced in the Introduction, the circumstances of his death remain contested despite the disclosure of official accounts – demonstrates the need for a relational approach to transparency and the importance of better understanding how, for Gambian citizens, a reformed security sector might look like and what role trans-

parency holds in this. Only in this way we can fully grasp the dynamics of transparency as it unfolds in the context of SSR, not merely as a stated principle, but as a lived, negotiated, and at times contested practice.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights
AU	African Union
AUPSC	African Union Peace and Security Council
DLEAG	Drug Law Enforcement Agency
ECOMIG	ECOWAS Mission in The Gambia
ECOMOG	ECOWAS Monitoring Group
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
GAF	The Gambia Armed Forces
GFRS	The Gambia Fire and Rescue Services
GID	The Gambia Immigration Department
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GPF	Gambian Police Force
GPF	The Gambia Police Force
NDP	National Development Plan
NIA	National Intelligence Agency
NSC	National Security Council
NSC	National Security Council
NSP	National Security Policy
NSS	National Security Strategy
ONS	Office of National Security
PCRD	Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development
REC	Regional Economic Community
RF-NDP	Recovery-Focused National Development Plan
RWAFF	Royal West African Frontier Force
SIS	State Intelligence Services
SSR	Security Sector Reform
SSRG	Security Sector Reform and Governance
SSRS	Security Sector Reform Strategy
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNOWAS	United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel
UNSG	United Nations Secretary General

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