

No. 66

working papers

# Façades of Security Sector Reform in Guinea- Bissau: Simulating Norm Translation

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August 2025



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## Abstract

About two decades after the international community urged Guinea-Bissau to implement comprehensive security sector reform to stabilize the small state, which has characterized by authoritarian tendencies, military interference in politics, coup attempts, and poverty, the diverse problems within the security forces, the legislative sphere, and the judicial system persist. Contrary to the successes claimed by international actors at the time, the sometimes poorly coordinated reform efforts sometimes had the opposite effect and even contributed to a further politicization of the security forces and thus destabilization. This working paper, based on field research conducted in Guinea-Bissau in 2013 and 2014, problematizes the reform efforts at the time. The author argues that the widespread failure of the reforms can be traced to the lack of a “true” vernacularization of security sector norms, because international actors often resorted to façades, i.e., they were content with simulating the translation of norms into local contexts.

## Zusammenfassung

Rund zwei Jahrzehnte, nachdem die internationale Staatengemeinschaft Guinea-Bissau zur Durchführung einer umfassenden Reform des Sicherheitssektors drängte, um dem von autoritären Tendenzen, Einmischungen des Militärs in die Politik und Umsturzversuchen und Armut geprägten Kleinstaat zu stabilisieren, bleiben die vielfältigen Probleme in den Sicherheitskräften, im Gesetzgebungsbereich und im Justizbereich bestehen. Im Gegensatz zu den von internationalen Akteuren seinerzeit behaupteten Erfolgen, bewirkten die teils wenig koordinierten Reformanstrengungen das Gegenteil und trugen mitunter sogar zu einer weiteren Politisierung der Sicherheitskräfte und damit Destabilisierung bei. Das vorliegende Working Paper problematisiert auf Basis von in den Jahren 2013 und 2014 in Guinea-Bissau durchgeführten Feldforschungen die seinerzeitigen Reformbemühungen. Der Autor argumentiert, dass das weitgehende Scheitern der Reformen im Ausbleiben einer „echten“ Vernakularisierung von Sicherheitssektornormen zu suchen ist, weil sich internationale Akteure vielfach mit Fassaden begnügten, d.h. sich mit einer Simulation der Übersetzung von Normen in lokale Kontexte zufriedengaben.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

About two decades have passed since first steps towards an all-encompassing security sector reform (SSR) were taken in Guinea-Bissau, West Africa. After a nine months civil war in 1998-99, Guinea-Bissau was internationally regarded as a state characterized by political instability and recurring military overthrows and coup attempts. With a surface area of approximately 36,000 square kilometers (corresponding approximately to the size of Belgium) and a population of around 2.2 million (according to estimates/projections by United Nations Population Fund 2025), Guinea-Bissau is among the smallest African countries. The country is heavily dependent on aid and the population is culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse.

Prominent issues such as widespread poverty, corruption and a lack of both financial and skills capacities have been supplemented more recently by international drug-trafficking, in which some Bissau-Guinean officials and private citizens are involved. Fears that Guinea-Bissau could follow a path similar to that of war-torn neighbors Sierra Leone, and Liberia (Mair 2001: 53 and 69), may have been implicit in considerations concerning implementation of an SSR. An SSR was identified by the international community, notably by the UN and EU, as a crucial means to restore constitutional order and consolidate democracy (United Nations 2012). Thus, generally speaking, a functioning security sector, including the rule of law, was conceived – in accordance with normative SSR concepts – as a prerequisite not only for good governance and national and regional political stability but also for economic and social development (OECD 2005: 20; 2007: 21). Simply put, it was expected – or at least hoped – that some surgical international interventions would change the country's security sector for the better within a short period of time, modelling security institutions along supposedly successful Global North institutions and practices. This has not happened – quite the contrary: for some time SSR has even contributed to Guinea-Bissau's destabilization, that is, a military takeover in April 2012 (Kohl 2014). Even some twenty years after the first steps toward security sector reform, Guinea-Bissau's security forces continue to present a poor image. Reports repeatedly testify to the violence and unfair means used by police forces against demonstrators protesting against the authoritarian regimes of presidents José Mário Vaz (2014-20) and, in an even more severe manner, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, in power since 2020. The country's armed forces have also not escaped criticism. On the occasion of the celebrations marking the 60th anniversary of its founding in November 2024, a street survey conducted by Deutsche Welle revealed the divided relationship many Bissau-Guineans have with their army: "The armed forces have failed to fulfill their duties. That is why I cannot say that the balance of the 60 years is positive," said one student interviewed, while another person added: "We can talk about armed forces that are not acting in accordance with the will of the people". Indeed, a researcher at Guinea-Bissau's Instituto da Defesa Nacional confirmed that "in recent years, the armed forces, instead of taking a nonpartisan position and equidistant from political disputes, seem to sponsor struggles and problems involving politicians, holding press conferences and responding to some political groups" (Dansó 2024). Thus, certain political problems have root causes that date back a long time: Because SSR was not implemented substantially and donors were largely content with façades, i.e. the simulation of SS norms translation instead of a "genuine" vernacularization, profound security sector related problems that permeate the country's sociopolitical sphere continue to persist. This negative impression contrasted sharply with the alleged success that international actors at the time attributed to the reform projects: The case of Guinea-Bissau illustrates how SSR was portrayed by donors such as the EU or the UN in personal talks in a positive light by international donors, including in terms of public relations, despite the mixed success that was achieved from an analytical point of view – even shortly after the end of key projects.

At the same time, Guinea-Bissau serves as an example of a rearrangement of power relations as a result of (both intended and unintended) SSR norm transmission processes. I argue that there have been many undesired or unplanned effects of SSR implementation, possibly diluting or even reversing reform attempts. I will point to specific aspects of SSR that make the case of Guinea-Bissau a distinct contribution to the debate over the operation of and the cultural dynamics linked to the expected transmission of norms, practices and ideas as a significant part of such reforms. A key objective of this analysis will be to study repercussions triggered by SSR, thus showing under what conditions norm transmissions happen and how these affect mostly Global North SSR norms transmitters (such as UN agencies, the EU, etc.). Given that foreign SSR interventions have prevailed in Guinea-Bissau, it is crucial to understand the limited success of previous SSRs in order to learn from unintended power rearrangements. Unlike countries that possess state institutions that are able to run reforms in the security sector on their own, Guinea-Bissau relied to a large extent on foreign SSR expertise and experts. Against this background, a close look at international interventions can show whether and to what extent Guinea-Bissau actually owned SSR both in practice and on paper, and thus reveals whether international institutions *de facto* are pursuing a vernacularization approach or merely pretending to do so.

Because Guinea-Bissau is a small country with a small population, the contradictions that have resulted in the limited success of SSR are easily traceable. Consequently, I argue that, in numerous ways, SSR in Guinea-Bissau can be regarded as a *façade*. It may correspond, at worst, to a Potemkin village in which only the *façades* are embellished, while the interiors of the buildings are untidy and/or of poor quality. In this sense, SSR could be argued to be successful even if it did not produce the desired results. Alternatively, the catch-cry “SSR” may simply serve to paper over sets of heterogeneous projects, programs, practices and experts under a clearly arranged and structured Modernist style *façade* of industrial steel and plate glass – rather than evoking disorderly, eclectic, and playful *façade* connotations. In other words, the notion of SSR sometimes links a set of diverse projects implemented by various (at times antagonistic) donors to ensure a consistent appearance in progress reports and subsequent new project applications – just as a *façade*’s paint and plaster occasionally keep together a fragile building.

This is not much different from many development projects in non-security sectors. However, the crucial difference is that SSR targets the heart of any state’s core tasks, in other words, the provision of security and rule of law as fundamental parts of the political system’s “authoritative allocation of values” (David Easton). This has consequences for SSR, as it has to guarantee, more than other development projects, national ownership, at least in theory. Tensions arise from the fact that “participation” (Bliss 1996), since the 2000s rebranded “local ownership” and “national ownership” in international cooperation in general and in SSR in particular is cited as a prerequisite for respecting a given state’s sovereignty and its (or its citizens’) right to independently determine the path of development (OECD 2007: 28, cf. 11, 16-17, 21, 26, 31-33 etc.). This “democratization project,” however, is only one side of the coin in SSR. The dark side of what Evelina Dagnino has called a “perverse confluence” (Dagnino 2004) is the (neo-)liberal project that has gained tremendous ground since the 1980s. On the one hand, since the end of the Cold War the liberal approach to international relations identified liberal democracy and a free market as the apex of political development, thus tacitly declaring political institutional arrangements in the Global North as globally desirable objectives. On the other hand, a critical view of the state favored economic liberalization, deregulation, and thus the withdrawal of the state from sectors not considered core tasks. Instead, the strengthening of the private economic sector and civil society (notably non-governmental organizations) has been regarded the model not

only for the Global North but also for countries in the Global South. As far as SSR is concerned, this implicitly means that security-sector architecture in the Global North (ignoring the North's heterogeneity of arrangements) together with its liberalized governance system was considered the desirable ideal for Global South countries such as Guinea-Bissau as well. Yet, both the (neo-)liberal and the democratization project were experiencing a conflict of interests that was mirrored in façades of SSR implementation. Hence, fundamental differences in implementing reforms in the security sector prevail, sometimes resulting in an attempted unilateral transfer of Global North norms, ideas, concepts and practices while a façade of locally grounded and integrated projects is maintained. This norm-transmission gap is crucial for understanding many problems and shortcomings connected with SSR in Guinea-Bissau and beyond.

I will start by exploring what SSR norms embedded in certain practices, approaches, and ideas, among them “entry point” and “toolkit” concepts, have been subjected to vernacularization and/or simulation of translation in Guinea-Bissau, how this occurred, and what has resulted from it. Here, light will also be shed on repercussions and the resilience of SSR norm transfers. In this context, I will also discuss the importance of literal façades, meaning buildings and other structures erected as part of SSR, revealing a fixation with modern techniques and their appropriateness among many international SSR experts I met in Guinea-Bissau. To be specific, I will discuss the SSR brand and how the (non-)use of the SSR term sometimes already hinted at a simulation of translation of SSR concept and its normative framework. Toolkit, best practice, and lighthouse solutions, notably the model police station, form yet another set of analyses: Although they suggest high levels of vernacularization, examples from Guinea-Bissau show how they may also be subjected to simulations of translation. A further subsection is dedicated to projects run in the justice sector: Unlike many other projects, these projects have emphasized a bottom-up approach implying vernacularization. However, the case of the legal counseling centers demonstrates the limitations of such endeavors. The donation of equipment and buildings by the international community are frequently – but wrongly – seen as an easy, highly visible practice, camouflaging the missing vernacularization of content related to material manifestations. Another section will analyze power asymmetries and reconfigurations as both a consequence of and a precondition for SSR. This refers to both re-arrangements among donor institutions and between international SSR-implementing organizations and Bissau-Guinean authorities. I will examine how subtle power asymmetries are an integral part of most SSR relationships – despite normative affirmations of equality between donors and their local partners. From a macro-perspective, I will investigate the politicization of SSR in the Bissau-Guinean context, making SSR in that country a plaything of international interests. However, even at local level the examination of how customary law projects are codified illustrates how the translation of methods is simulated and results in a creation of new structures of domination. A final section will show that local SSR key stakeholders do exert a certain degree of ownership all the same, by translating international SSR requirements of potent local partners in “undesired” ways.<sup>1</sup>

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1 This working paper essentially draws from qualitative findings collected during field research stays in Guinea-Bissau in February-March 2013 (eight weeks) and August-October 2014 (six weeks). With regard to methodology, the analysis is essentially based on ‘thick participations’ (Spittler 2001) that are supplemented by primary and secondary sources, numerous informal talks, and formal interviews (with international and local experts working for both international organizations such as the UN and the EU as well as non-governmental organisations, ordinary citizens, and Bissau-Guineans working in the police, military and justice sectors). Resulting data has been anonymized to protect the dialogue partners. This body of empirical material leads to a thick description (Ponterotto 2006). This research took predominantly place in the capital, Bissau, which houses the headquarters of international organizations and government agencies (police, military and justice). Research was also carried out in Bafatá Region in order to contrast urban with rural security sector (reform) characteristics.

## 2. VERNACULARIZATION VS. SIMULATION OF TRANSLATION

### 2.1 *Adapting or Simulating the SSR Brand*

As per its definition, SSR “does not only target structures, institutions and personnel within the armed forces and police, but likewise the legal system, customs, prisons, border protection, the secret service as well as official supervisory committees, relevant ministries and the legislative branch. Furthermore, such reforms can also encompass non-state actors such as guerrilla groups, private security contractors, civil society groups and “traditional” legal systems. [...] Security sector reform is not only supposed to lead to good governance, sustainable security, the rule of law and local leadership responsibility but to socio-economic development as well (Kohl 2014: 6, referring to OECD 2005: 20; 2007: 21).

The reason behind this is a “norms transmission gap,” as I call it, meaning that there are crucial contradictions between normative aspirations and the social practice of SSR norms transmission. More precisely, I argue that the distinct feature of SSR in Guinea-Bissau is a predominance of a “façade” that only simulates translation of SSR norms – at the expense of a “genuine” vernacularization of SSR norms. The latter means that norms are subject to innovations and transformations in new geographic, social, cultural, political and economic contexts, in the course of which people integrate (without suggesting intentionality) useful characteristics into their cultural repertoire while dropping incompatible ones (Walker 2005: 192, 195), thus adapting the norms to their own needs, habits, and wishes (cf. Latour 2005 and Levitt and Merry 2009). Yet, importantly, the distinction between vernacularization and simulation is fluid. Although the existence of this vernacularization phenomenon has been firmly established in mainstream developmental research (e.g., the seminal paper by Merry 2006), SSR in Guinea-Bissau, by contrast, demonstrates how the simulated translation of SSR forms often supplants vernacularization, serving to camouflage (failed) one-way transfers. However, while the SSR arena in Guinea-Bissau has been characterized by the competing phenomena of vernacularization and simulation of translation, this social practice was marked by permanent tension with official normative requirements and practitioners’ off-stage claims. Hence, whereas SSR practitioners, their agendas and SSR policy approaches (e.g., OECD 2005, 2007) professed adherence to the principle of ownership and thus of vernacularization, behind closed doors some project experts admitted to pursuing a policy of one-sided norm transfer – effectively resulting in an undesired vernacularization or a simulation of norms transmission. However, because local ownership is a normative requirement, for instance of the OECD and UN, a participatory façade of norm transfer adoption has to be maintained. Avoiding vernacularization hence results in a mere simulation of transfer of forms without “transporting” the related content such as meanings, skills, knowledge, meaningfulness, context, etc., thus amounting to a feigned transfer process. Thus, although toolkit and best practice solutions are believed (and hoped) to be easily adapted to local needs, this is often not the case, and the depth of vernacularization remains limited.

The vernacularization and simulation of translation of SSR already find their expression in the use (or non-use) of the SSR term. In the 2000s, the notion of SSR became widespread throughout Guinea-Bissau and among international institutions (UN, EU, the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP), etc.) concerned with the country’s stability and security. It seems that the emergence of SSR since the late 1990s has triggered not only awareness that SSR would be “the” solution for many of Guinea-Bissau’s problems but has also prompted the provision of new pots of money for new projects concerned with reconciliation, security, etc. During my first extended fieldwork stay in Guinea-Bissau in 2006-07,

I was able to observe the number of local as well as international experts who had become involved in this field. Not only the UN and the EU were increasingly talking about the need for reforming the security sector. Already at that time, a local politician, Idrissa Djaló, leader of a small, extra-parliamentarian political party, together with Canadian development experts/researchers and funded by the UN, was promoting the idea of *Estados Gerais da Guiné-Bissau* (approximately: General Status of Guinea-Bissau), a discussion forum that was supposed to bring together key stakeholders from the government, security forces (notably the military), civil society representatives and international experts in order to diagnose, debate, and tackle Guinea-Bissau's political, societal and security sector problems (República da Guiné-Bissau 2005). This initiative ultimately failed, but it showed that something was going on. It is true that the formal brand SSR was not or was only very weakly associated with the project. Nonetheless, it showed that there was growing sensibility for such issues on the international stage. Around that time, the UN, supported by British experts, began to prepare a survey to conduct a profound SSR, and the EU was about to prepare its EU-SSR mission that lasted from 2008 to 2010. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) soon launched its rule of law program, *Programa de Fortalecimento do Estado de Direito e Segurança* (FORTES), setting up the National Judicial Training Centre (CENFOJ) and "Access to Justice Centers" (in Portuguese: Centros de Acesso à Justiça, CAJ) as well as, together with the EU, a project to codify "customary law." The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) started its activities in Guinea-Bissau in the area of crime prevention, with a focus on narco-trafficking blossoming at the time. Later, after the failure of the EU's mission, Angola, then an oil-rich emerging regional power and member of the CPLP, joined in with its peace mission in 2011, soon to be replaced by an ECOWAS force after a military coup that occurred in early 2012. Meanwhile, further bilateral actors such as Brazil (police training), China (provision of army equipment, housing and military hospital construction), and Portugal (police and military training) joined in or continued activities that were already in progress (see Kohl 2014 for a brief chronological and sectoral overview of SSR-related activities). For years, donors have also discussed setting up a veterans' pension fund, recognized as a crucial contribution to political stability. All of these projects were marketed as parts of "SSR," apparently because this was the most promising label to attract project funds. Surprisingly enough, other projects, such as the EU's justice sector-related PAOSSED (Programme to Support Sovereignty Bodies and the Rule of Law in Guinea-Bissau) formally remained outside the scope of SSR.

Much like international and bilateral donors did, non-governmental organizations also jumped on the bandwagon with SSR as a selling point. These included the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the Switzerland-based peacebuilding organization Interpeace. The latter supported a local non-governmental organization, Voz di Paz (Voice of Peace), for several years, focusing on conflict mediation, surveys and calls for peace and reconciliation via cooperating radio stations, thus contributing to peacebuilding in a wider sense (interview with Voz di Paz personnel, Bissau, February 21, 2013). Another non-governmental organization that has been active in the field in Guinea-Bissau has been the Berlin-based Weltfriedensdienst (WFD), funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. The WFD had set up a project with a local non-governmental organization funded for that purpose by military members, Space for Starting up Conversation (DDCC), trying to sensitize army members for peaceful conflict resolution in a joint organization, Mon ku Mom (Hand in Hand). In 2015, a new local partner to replace the DDCC, Theatre of the Oppressed Group (GTO-Bissau) emerged. The joint project was baptized "Peace Forum" (interviews with WFD and DDCC personnel, Bissau, March 5 and 7, 2013; personal information, WFD representative, January 2016).

As this brief and partial overview shows, many international organizations became active in the fields of peace-building and SSR, both terms turning into catch-cries that helped create projects and raise money. However, SSR (like, or rather, together with peacebuilding) could – as we have seen – encompass projects and programs of extremely different forms and kinds. While some projects explicitly referred to SSR such as by including the “brand” in its project description, others touched upon the theme more or less loosely, even without formally referring to SSR. Furthermore, while some projects were run under the “SSR” label in a wider sense, such as, for instance, UNDP’s and EU’s codification of customary law projects, others, such as PAOSED, that could be identified as projects within the SSR scope according to OECD’s and UN’s definitions, were formally excluded.

In summary, although official SSR definitions and codifications pretended to clearly delineate a certain space, in practice the field is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity. Therefore, it was sometimes difficult to say whether projects were actually SSR projects or not, and why. Thus, we can regard SSR as a flexible container that can be filled with normative SSR content: In this regard, the application of the SSR label can be regarded in some cases as a simulation of the translation of SSR norms, as can be best observed in the cases of simple donation projects, or the Angolan and ECOWAS peace missions that were portrayed by their promoters as supporting SSR. On the other hand, we find local projects that were not run under the SSR umbrella but in their spirit could be regarded as contributions to an all-encompassing SSR, such as, for example, the Mon ku Mon project mentioned above.

## 2.2 *Toolkits, Best Practices and Lighthouses*

The implementation of so-called “toolkit” solutions and best practices actually suggest a true vernacularization of SSR norms. However, upon closer examination, this is not always the case. Instead, in some cases feigning translation is the key objective. Most SSR projects – whether state or non-state-centered – do not emerge from nothing, but rather revert in many cases to best practices and toolkits. Circulating handbooks (either as paper documents, electronic files or online compendia) or personal experiences or knowledge acquired through colleagues and friends contain not only major concepts (i.e., setting up entire projects) but also methods (i.e., planning workshops, rallies, etc.) at a lower level useful for various SSR endeavors. Part of toolkits and best practices are so-called lighthouses. That approach was little more than a simulation of local ownership, rather than a vernacularization of SSR ownership norms of cooperation into local worlds of thought (informal, confidential conversations with a local expert working for an international non-governmental organization, Bissau, March 5 and 7, 2013).

However, even when a project has been initiated, simulation of translation instead of vernacularization can be paramount. This holds true in particular for entry point approaches such as the installation of model police stations. The Bissau-Guinean example demonstrates how local expectations, perceptions, demands, contexts, etc. can be neglected, showing how a project can often revert to simulation rather than true vernacularization. The model police station opened by the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIIOGBIS, mandated from 1999/2009 until December 2020) in a poor neighborhood in Guinea-Bissau’s capital in late 2011 was a good example (cf. Carmignani and Cavalcante 2016). The model police station is a travelling model that had also spread to other countries such as Nigeria (see Hills 2012; Müller, this volume), the Philippines (Varona 2012), and India (e.g. Jha 2009), for instance, at the time. In Bissau, we could see how such lighthouses, often being little more than fragile façades, were exposed to the danger of being washed away by the waves. Police officials working in the model police station

were frequently unable to fulfil the expectations that SSR experts had of them, namely to do work at least similar in quality and quantity to that of their fellow expatriate police officers from Europe, Asia or America. Ultimately, local Bissau-Guinean police officers were thus tacitly perceived by the UN policewomen and policemen who oversee training and the functioning of the police station as “bad copies” of themselves. This caused high levels of disappointment among international experts. Many of those whom I met repeatedly lamented in conversations that local police officers “did not get it,” “forgot” skills and knowledge, and did not “do as they were trained” – comments that actually suggested irrational behavior or an incapacity to learn. In other words, in this perception knowledge was not adopted by police officers. Rather, they apparently tended to simulate the acquisition of certain skills in the presence of the experts because they were unable to either apply them for various reasons or had not understood them during training.

That simulation rather than vernacularization was the order of the day became obvious to me when I participated in Bissau’s model police station in a UNIOGBIS toolkit training session on human rights (participant observation and various interviews with UNIOGBIS and police staff, Bissau, September 22 and 23, 2014). UNIOGBIS’s attempt to place more emphasis on local authorities in the area of education and training became evident on the first day of the training course when a Bissau-Guinean lawyer held a lecture on human rights in police work. The lawyer provided few concrete examples, and the lecture remained highly abstract and theoretical, and had a very limited impact on the officers present. This was clear when I talked to various participants after the course. During a subsequent course, one of the participants asked the UN police officer leading the course in which cases human rights could be violated. His response – “on February 31 of last year – never!” – was met with laughter. However, this example highlights the limited impact of “exported” and quite abstract ideas and their limited or even totally absent vernacularization into local worlds of thought by local or international trainers. Despite assertions that norms from security sector reforms can translate into other “webs of belief” (Willard Van Orman Quine, see Kaufmann and Rottenburg 2012: 222), many of the training sessions I witnessed seemed inappropriate for fostering such a process.

Talking to Bissau-Guinean police officers on duty in the model police station and a closer analysis revealed that their actions were indeed rational, and not “irrational,” as conversations with expatriate UNIOGBIS officers implied (Kohl 2015a). After a military coup that occurred in April 2012 and the subsequent installation of a non-constitutional “transitional government” for two years, UNIOGBIS, exactly like a range of other donors, suspended activities and support for the model police station. In the meantime, some officers who had previously been trained in new approaches and techniques such as community policing, quit the service or were transferred to other police stations. Funds and expertise for the maintenance of police cars, computer equipment, etc. were not provided by the interior ministry, owing to a general lack of money and capacity in one of the poorest countries in the world. Thus, the infrastructure suffered from neglect, and it was not possible to keep overheads (e.g., fuel for the generator and the only functioning police car, access to the public power grid, making copies, stationery, etc.) in regular supply. During post-coup transitional government rule, civil servants were not paid for several months. Regular salaries were very low anyway, starting from less than €45 a month for the lowest ranks – an amount that made it impossible to make ends meet. Consequently, some police officers moonlighted. This meant that service delivery was of low quality and disillusionment was reinforced. Most importantly, UNIOGBIS’s Bissau-Guinean partner institution, the interior ministry that oversees the police, was apparently not strongly integrated into the model police reform agenda, and continued its business as usual. Thus, for instance, the rigid, hi-

erarchical top-down command structures apparently inherited from both colonial and early post-independence socialist-communist times remained firmly in place, without much leeway for administrative autonomy and local decision-making at the police stations. On these grounds, calls by international UNIOGBIS police officers for the conduct of crime sensitization campaigns at schools, easier cooperation with other police units (such as the rapid intervention police force), or the abolition of twenty-four hour shifts that left police officers tired and inactive were rejected by policemen and policewomen on duty at the model police station. They referred to the interior ministry that had not and probably would not allow such new practices. At the same time, my research showed that some “good practices” – such as those transmitted in training sessions organized by UNIOGBIS – were not applied because certain circles profit financially from the established “bad practices.” This included, among other things, the frequent practice of police officers administrating, i.e. “making justice” at police stations on the spot in exchange for payments from the conflicting parties, the collection of small, unofficial mileage and service charges from people who call the police (serving officially to cover the officers’ transport by public transport or taxi), the use of the police car by the head of the model police station for private matters, and, as informal conversations suggested, the release of detained persons in exchange for a donation to the responsible commissioner in the ministry. In other words, even if the police officers on duty at Bissau’s model police station were all willing to apply their new knowledge, they would effectively be unable to do so because of various restraints. Thus, due to the persisting, largely unchanged environment, the model police station remained, to some extent, a façade in which old, and from a normative SSR point of view undesirable practices prevailed. This example also showed how UNIOGBIS trainers at the model police station – a best practice or lighthouse measure implemented in many other settings worldwide – actually failed to convey their knowledge in the local setting while, at the same time, local police officers saw that they could not simply adopt recommendations suggested by their trainers. Here again, interaction corresponded to a simulation of norms and ideas, resulting from a mutual inability to understand each other. Thus, trainers simulated understanding for their Bissau-Guinean colleagues while Bissau-Guinean police officers pretended to adopt new skills and knowledge, despite knowing that because of environment conditions and exigencies little would change in social practice.

To put it differently, the sea threatened to engulf the lighthouse, sort of “(semi-)enlightened” police officers, one might say, (re-)adopted widespread “bad”, old practices, representing a mix of undesired vernacularizations or even simulated translations. Simultaneously, many police officers were fully aware of the shortcomings of UNIOGBIS activities related to their police station, such as a lack of empathy and of “a thorough understanding of the social and cultural fabric” (Mannitz 2014: 272) on the part of many expatriate police officials. This is due to their short-term presence in Guinea-Bissau in general and at the model police station in particular (see Kohl 2015a, b). Yet, by “playing the game,” local policewomen and policemen contributed to the perpetuation of the reform façade built by UNIOGBIS and other organizations.

### *2.3 Aspiring to Vernacularization, Ending up with Simulation*

Conversely, often a sense of goodwill, the desire to do it better was there. By choosing a bottom-up approach, some projects place emphasis on “true” vernacularization rather than mere simulation of translation. Indeed, some projects in Guinea-Bissau’s SSR realm have not only paid lip-service to ownership, participation, and vernacularization but have explicitly aimed at respecting and integrating supposedly local demands and views. This was particularly true for projects in the country’s justice sector that aimed at improving people’s ac-

cess to legal institutions. Projects such as the CAJ were actually modelled along the lines of so-called legal aid clinics and could therefore be conceived as normative institutions to be translated into Bissau-Guinean contexts. Nonetheless, even in such more bottom-up projects façades continued to persist. In other words, despite genuine attempts, project procedures and outcomes were frequently based to a substantial degree on a simulation of SSR norms translation.

The legal aid clinic (or legal aid societies, cf. the classic contributions by Bradway 1930, 1931, 1939) toolkit blueprint served, according to an expatriate interviewee working for UNDP, as the model for the installed CAJ, which was propagated by the UN agency in other settings too such as, for example, in Palestine (Qafisheh 2012). For years, the UNDP prepared for draft laws. Finally, the national parliament enshrined the CAJ by law. The mission of the CAJ was to improve the access of the poor, in particular women, by offering legal consultation services free of charge (interview UNDP expert, Bissau, February 18, 2013). The CAJ were thus supposed to rebalance disadvantages in access to the justice sector that was marked by highly corrupt practices and suffered from a bad public reputation (Bugnion 2013: 5, 19-20), while the original concept also emphasized the education of young lawyers (Bradway 1930). The first CAJ in Guinea-Bissau opened in 2011, further centers followed in 2013 after the joint project of different UN institutions was terminated in May 2013. All centers had two well trained assistant judicial technicians and one administrative assistant, and were supposed to cooperate closely with the local human rights non-governmental organization Guinean League for Human Rights (LGDH) (Bugnion 2013: 19, 21). The employees were also required to be fluent not only in the official language, Portuguese, and the lingua franca, Kriol, but also in at least one of the local languages spoken in the respective regions, to facilitate communication with less educated citizens, as I was told by UNDP experts. When I visited the CAJ in Bafatá in September 2014, cooperation with the LGDH had already ended some months before. However, similar to other “entry point” projects, the CAJ project stood out as an isolated project that appeared to be hardly capable of changing the functioning of Guinea-Bissau’s entire justice sector and spreading so-called “good practices.” Even an evaluation report had to admit that:

The CAJ alone have neither the competence nor the means of ensuring lasting change – the entire chain of justice must be targeted. To ensure the sustainability of the achievements, a larger program would have to take over, and facilitate articulation with all the other links in the chain. (Bugnion 2013: 20; translation by author)

Much like the CENFOJ, the CAJ also ran the risk of failure due to the fact that the Bissau-Guinean government did not have any funds at its disposal to “fulfil their mandate” (Bugnion 2013: 26). Lawyers both at old town Bissau Velho’s CAJ and at CENFOJ, the latter situated on the outskirts of Bissau and, like the CAJ, supported and set up by the UNDP, raised their concerns over the future of their institutions in conversations with me (interviews, Bissau, February 19 and 20, 2013; Bafatá, September 15–18, 2014). In fact, the CAJ project was an attempt to provide a bottom-up approach in SSR, its expatriate authors bearing in mind particularly disadvantaged citizens in one of the poorest countries in the world. Yet, various conversations I had with citizens in Bissau and Bafatá in February and March 2013 and September and October 2014 showed that many people both in Bissau and in Bafatá had not heard of the CAJ at all. A few clients in Bissau I talked to did not belong to the country’s poor population but rather to the middle class. In order to protect privacy, I was not able to talk to Bissau-Guineans frequenting the CAJ for consultation, and so I had to rely on people I knew personally. Findings in the countryside were not much

different: as it turned out during a half-day excursion of the CAJ staff to the quite remote, isolated sector administration post of Cossé in Bafatá region, many citizens were not yet aware of the CAJ project, but welcomed the idea. However, the most disadvantaged also made it clear that they had neither means of transport nor funds for traveling with one of the rare public transport vehicles (motorbikes, bush taxis, etc.) to the CAJ in Bafatá (group interview, Cossé, September 16, 2014). The numbers of cases dealt with at the CAJ that I was able to observe showed that, indeed, the vast majority of people who consulted the CAJ and its mobile team traveling to the sectors came primarily from the Bafatá and Gabú sectors (part of the neighboring Gabú region “managed” from the CAJ in Bafatá), and only tiny minorities came from other, more remote sectors. Between September 2013 and August 2014, no queries were reported from the sectors of Ganadu and Contubuel, only two from the sector of Cossé and three from Sonaco. According to internal statistics, the number of consultations of the CAJ and its traveling team started on February 8, 2013 and reached a peak in August 2013 (79 consultations) and another peak in July 2014 (59 consultations); generally the numbers ranged from about twenty to forty per month. Yet, when I visited the CAJ in Bafatá from September 15–18, 2014, business was leisurely, and I witnessed only one consultation by a client who had already visited the CAJ the month before on the same matter. When I asked the employees about the low level of demand, they referred to the ongoing rainy and holiday season. Yet, the year before, 43 consultations had been officially counted. As a conversation with a local LDGH activist (interview, Bafatá, September 20, 2014) revealed, cooperation between CAJ (and thus UNDP) and the LGDH had ended a few months before, for financial reasons. In the past, LGDH had increased awareness in communities especially in the interior, using members who had been trained by UNDP on human rights issues, etc. (see UNDP 2012: 4). These activities had now come to an end. He confirmed that many people in the hinterland neither knew about their rights and the CAJ, nor had the means to travel to Bafatá. In other words, UNDP tried to translate norms into local contexts but despite goodwill, the project was unlikely to end in success as a social practice. The difficult administrative environment, limited funding and a lack of appropriately trained staff in Guinea-Bissau prevented the project from standing on its own feet. The CAJ thus resembled – at least during its build-up phase – to some extent, and despite some positive results achieved, yet another isolated lighthouse project in which the attempts to translate SSR norms, ideas, and approaches ran the risk of merely going through the motions and nothing more.

Regarding its advisory activities, the CAJ did not possess hardcopy law gazette collections necessary to properly give advice to citizens (at the time, a remote accessible electronic law gazette archive did not exist). The lawyers working at the CAJ had to – like “ordinary” lawyers – consult the library at the Bissau Law Faculty. There, a legal research database existed that some CAJ lawyers downloaded to their own notebook computers. Much more important, however, was the issue of attorneys’ fees, painting a dark picture of problems that would arise once the UNDP eventually suspended its financial support – as feared, in 2025, the CAJ still existed, albeit under “very difficult” conditions and with “quite reduced” support from UNDP (conversation with Bissau-Guinean legal expert, June 16, 2025). In order to facilitate the access of poor people to the judicial system, the CAJ could, in proven cases, make available professional lawyers who were directly paid by the Bissau-Guinean Bar association whose expenditures were refunded by the UNDP (interviews, Bissau, February 19, 2013). Yet, it was unclear how the chronically poverty stricken Bissau-Guinean state might follow in the footsteps of UNDP, not to mention the necessity of creating new laws or modifying existing ones. Problems became tangible when I was told by a legal expert about the technical procedures involved in law making in Guinea-Bissau. An important law,

regulating the creation of the post of an “instructing judge,” supposed to act as an independent guide to the prosecutor’s office, was not published in the law gazette even after more than a year after it had been adopted by parliament. Therefore, the law could not enter into force. The reason was that the government printer INACEP had been factually insolvent for several years (interview, UNDP expert, Bissau, February 18, 2013). As I knew from my own experience, many INACEP employees were not paid for months, and thus sold publications on their own account. To “accelerate” the printing and thus the entry into force of the law, legal experts related to UNDP’s projects, including the CAJ, had to ask UNIOGBIS for funds. UNIOGBIS agreed and, consequently, paper could be bought and the law gazettes printed.

These vignettes show that justice sector reform in Guinea-Bissau was, to a large extent and not much unlike reforms in the police sector, little more than a façade propped up by the UNDP (and other international organizations such as UNIOGBIS). The limitations and restrictions were apparent: they served to some extent as a state within a state that pretended to uphold functioning of government institutions fashioned after the Global North blueprint although they were in fact caught in a short-sighted project logic. Such project fetishism does not do much to accommodate long-term, in-depth cooperation and involvement but, instead, generates a fancy, bright façade that conceals with much paint and stucco the deep cracks in the building, which threatens to collapse once the state institutions take over; the latter often being characterized not only by a lack of financing and capacities but also by the preponderance of opposing interests. Thus, many justice sector reform projects as well as other SSR projects seemed to be oriented towards an isolated entry point in order to ensure superficial success and generate follow-up funds, projects, and jobs. In this sense, even in the justice sector, where some promising initiatives were taken, vernacularization remained cursory and mostly scratched the surface while a deeper, more lasting impact was relegated to a few insular “façades.”

#### *2.4 Equipment and Buildings: Simulating Modernity with Materiality*

To avoid risky projects that entail time-consuming and thus expensive participatory processes, projects that focus on small and medium-scale technique transfer and construction work may emerge as a simple and easy alternative. Because most international SSR expatriates, local citizens, and local security officials in Guinea-Bissau would quickly agree on the necessity of modernizing the security sector’s equipment, introducing modern procedures and constructing or rehabilitating office buildings (such as police stations, court buildings, registry offices, and training facilities), the donation of equipment or the carrying out of construction works was another priority. Such activities are noticed by the general public and the media, and effects are visible and quantifiable. Related construction projects make a good impression in project progress and closure reports (cf. also Kohl 2015a). However, this investment in merely technical solutions, including donations, is subject to a misconception: in many cases, equipment and buildings cannot be used in local contexts because they cannot be maintained or used appropriately. This eventually leads to the mere appearance of modernity.

Materiality, as embodied in equipment, construction, and architecture, plays a crucial role in indicating modernization in spatial terms. The intention is to embody modernity and progress in renovated or newly erected buildings, marking the dawn of a new, better era (Dye 2016; Manful, Batsani-Ncube and Gallagher 2022: 571). The “improvements” are easily visible not only to those who work in the buildings and frequent the public authorities who are located in the structures – but also to the general public and to donors. Conveniently, once the construction is finished, the completed building can be celebrated as

a success. Another advantage is that costs of construction projects can be calculated. Hence, construction projects are much different from training and education programs, the positive impacts of which are difficult to measure. A similar logic applies to the donation of equipment, whether in the form of uniforms, firearms, computer equipment, or vehicles, etc. Therefore, and not surprisingly, construction and material equipment projects are very popular among donors. The People's Republic of China has always had a strong focus on such donations, and in Guinea-Bissau China has supplied, inter alia, military vehicles and sponsored the construction of veterans' housing and a military hospital. For this reason, many Chinese contract construction workers were flown in. Similarly, Angola intended to construct and renovate a number of police structures but, as a result of the overly hasty withdrawal of its peace forces, these works were never concluded or even commenced. Brazil constructed a brand-new police training center about 30 kilometers north of the capital, in João Landim at Rio Mansôa, UNODC and the EU engaged in the rehabilitation of justice and heritage buildings, among others in Bafatá, and UNIOGBIS constructed, inter alia, the model police station in Bissau's Bairro Militar neighborhood, as well as several CAJs in Bissau and the country's regions.

Maintaining the façade of modernity is also crucial in respect to Bafatá's correctional facility which was renovated and extended by adding a vocational training center and a small hospital ward with UN funds (UNODC and PBF [United Nations Peace Building Fund]). Initially built in 1946 and re-inaugurated in 2010, the small prison housed about 30 to 40 prisoners during my visit, and was one of only two "modern" correctional facilities in the country, the other one being the remand center in Mansôa. Thus, there could indeed be good reasons for calling this correctional facility an expression of a "new age," yet daily social practice showed the limits of such "progress" which was celebrated by some UN officials. In September 2014 I had the opportunity to join a UN team that visited the prison. The facility revealed – even to an inattentive observer – large holes in the outer fence, and entry controls were lax. The representative of an Italian non-governmental organization that used to run the vocational training project told me that he had even met prisoners in the middle of town during the day; another prisoner had reportedly traveled to the nearby town of Gabú and back in one day. A prison yard, separated from the facility building by an unpaved trail, was protected by a fence and razor wire, but the door was wide open and, without being watched by guards, some prisoners were playing checkers. The vocational training project had ended a few months earlier, and the contract had not yet been renewed by then. The facility appeared clean and well cared for. However, the justice ministry had not provided funds to pay the invoice of the local energy utility, nor to buy fuel for the generator, nor flour to bake bread, which served to promote self-sufficiency among the prisoners. At least the ministry was able to provide rice and cooking oil, while fish or vegetables had to be made available by the prisoners or their families and friends; money needed to be raised among the prisoners every day for that purpose. To contextualize this situation, the Italian told me that the remand center of the judicial police in Bissau, for instance, did not provide any food. In Bafatá the prisoners were well treated, he added. Thus, conditions in Bafatá were far better there. In other words, as with other institutions paid for by the international community, the correctional facility's operations possibly could not be maintained in their present form by the Bissau-Guinean government and could be regarded as another façade of modernity and progress. The prisoners and the facility's personnel kept up the sham not only by playing their roles, from which the prisoners could escape at any time, but also by simulating a justice sector functioning like in the Global North and could be presented to an international audience as the result of a successful reform measure. However, this simulated "success" was only partial and short-sighted. Nonetheless, it was marketed as a suc-

cess – to the benefit of all the institutions and personnel involved in justice sector reform (participant observations and various interviews with UN and correctional facility staff, a non-governmental organization employee, and prisoners, Bafatá, September 17, 2014).

This does not mean, though, that the construction of police, military, and justice buildings is unnecessary or a waste of time and money. Quite the contrary, many security sector-related structures in Guinea-Bissau originated from colonial times and were too small and worn out. Yet, the provision of new structures does not solve all problems in the security sector. Constructions mean modernity, not only to the international experts but also to many locals who associate progress primarily with material objects rather than with skills and knowledge. This was exemplified by the statement of a high-ranking UNIOGBIS officer who reportedly had declared Bafatá a “model city,” simply because the international community had (re-)reconstructed a number of justice sector buildings, such as the correctional facility, the CAJ office, the courthouse, and the registry office (interview, UNDP expert, Bafatá, September 18, 2014). Focusing on material progress, however, means neglecting the social context, and in many cases buildings that are taken as indicators of change and modernity house civil servants who continue to work as they always have. Reasons for this are manifold. Most importantly, the entire work environment (superiors, colleagues, related institutions, etc.) is unfavorable for the approaches promoted in SSR, whereas the old routines allow for benefits and privileges that would be lost as a result of change. There are various incentives and constraints that are often overlooked or perhaps deliberately ignored (for the sake of a quick project success, for example) by international experts. Yet, conversely, this image implies a “mentality of dependence” (*Acção para o Desenvolvimento* 1993: 41; translation by author) among many Bissau-Guineans, reinforcing the conviction that “their things are of less value” (Brazilian cultural worker quoted in Figueira 2013: 245). In other words, many citizens are convinced that predominately foreign interventions and products imply success, prosperity, development, and modernity. From this perspective, sections of the Bissau-Guineans actually distance themselves from local ownership, and literal façades of modern-looking model police stations, etc. reinforce this popular auto-suggestion of dependence. This phenomenon tacitly plays into the hands of an understanding of development along modernization lines that I often witnessed among many international SSR experts I talked to (e.g., interview, UNODC expert, Bissau; March 13, 2013; interview, Brazilian federal police agent, Bissau, March 6, 2013: on international experts and their perspectives, intentions, and constraints, see Rauch 1997). From their perspective, SSR is about the modernization, or rather “civilization” of Guinea-Bissau’s security sector, hence about the one-to-one transfer of Global North norms, ideas, approaches, etc. – despite the official, normative postulation and assertion of a vernacularization of international SSR norms, ideas, and approaches by so-called local owners into cultural, social, political and economic settings on site. This is because many international experts working in the SSR field have little familiarity with academic development theories (Kohl 2015a: 12, 15, 18–19).

Most significantly, however, the donation of equipment and the (re-)construction of buildings do not require, at least in the eyes of the experts, much vernacularization – if any at all. Many believe that a simulation of translation of forms suffices – function is seen as following form. Often, they seem to believe that, apart from taking basic climatic considerations into account, buildings can be constructed in a similar fashion anywhere. However, sometimes this turns out to be mistake. For instance, the model police station only has a small kitchen, whereas police officers are used to having lunch together (which is at least partly provided by the state), thus causing overcrowding. At the same time, the police station becomes very hot, because the metal roof and the absence of big trees create an unpleas-

antly hot and steamy climate within the building. Another example is China's construction of a military hospital on the outskirts of Bissau. China has become well known over the past decades for constructing stadiums, government buildings, roads, railway lines, etc. in Global South countries, particularly in Africa. However, these buildings often follow a common scheme, facilitating the construction of the same type of building in different locations. In Guinea-Bissau, the Chinese military hospital was constructed without taking into account that the area in which the clinic was built did not have a sewer system. As a result, wastewater originating from the hospital inundated parts of the access road to Bissau's most important bus taxi station, causing not only a sickening smell but also an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Similar problems arise from the donation of equipment that sometimes has little or no coordination at all. For example, because of the different donors, Guinea-Bissau's police officers were wearing different kinds of blue uniforms with different arm badges, sometimes making them look like a "patchwork force." Nigeria donated cars apparently widely used in that country, but for which spare parts can be only arranged with difficulty and at higher prices in Bissau because the brand was not very common in Guinea-Bissau. The model police station received about a dozen sets of riot helmets, which were stored in a corner in one of the cells during my stay in late 2014. However, it is not the Public Order Police at the police station who are responsible for combatting riots but the National Guard or the Rapid Intervention Police (participant observation and various interviews and informal conversation with police staff, Bissau, September 2014) that have their headquarters elsewhere in the city. Avoiding vernacularization hence results in a mere simulation of transfer of forms without "transporting" the related content such as meanings, skills, knowledge, meaningfulness, context, etc., thus amounting to a feigned transfer process.

Thus, although toolkit and best practice solutions are believed (and hoped) to be easily adapted to local needs, this is often not the case, and the depth of vernacularization remains limited. Illustrative is the case of an expatriate UNIOGBIS officer who had previously worked in a security sector project on another continent before being transferred to Guinea-Bissau, a country with which she had little familiarity (cf. Kohl 2015a: 9-10). She told me enthusiastically about her plan to transfer her previous project approach to Bissau by starting a project to bring together print journalists and the police in order to promote communication and exchange between the two sectors, the ordinary population being the beneficiaries. Obviously, she did not even know that print media only occupy a niche existence in the West African country. Once implemented, the project would have resulted in just another simulation because conditions in Guinea-Bissau differ from those in her previous deployment location. In other words, she paid little attention to the different socio-cultural environment in Bissau, and as a trained police officer she could not be blamed for her belief in a simple model transfer from one country to another and her limited familiarity with social, cultural, and economic aspects in her new project country.

### 3. (RE-)CREATING POWER ASYMMETRIES, GENERATING POWER RECONFIGURATIONS

#### 3.1 *Pretended Local Ownership and Power Asymmetries*

As has become clear, a host of failed transfer practices, undesired vernacularization, or simulations of translations of forms in SSR social practice prevail in Guinea-Bissau. Why has this happened? International SSR projects implemented in Guinea-Bissau by the EU and notably the UN have often fallen short of expectations. I have repeatedly talked to expatriate

SSR experts who displayed a deep sense of disappointment and frustration not only with Bissau-Guinean institutions, but also with local police officers they had worked with. Many experts could just not understand that Bissau-Guineans did not want to learn how to do it better. Thus, in general, discussions of SSR project effects mostly take a negative turn within the Bissau-Guinean context, all the more because Bissau-Guinean institutions and individuals did not follow the path of development. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Kohl 2014, 2015: 11–12), “true” local ownership was seen as nothing worthwhile; one expatriate with a police background even considered local ownership a threat to a successful transfer of purportedly superior Global North norms into local settings (interview, UNODC expert, Bissau, March 13, 2013). Going along with a lack of communication and exchange of experiences with locals, international expatriates often lack a profound “cultural impregnation” (Olivier de Sardan 1995; cf. Mannitz 2014: 272), resulting in incomprehension of local decision-making, interests, rationalities, and reasoning, and thus overlooking the reasons why Bissau-Guinean institutions and individuals do not want to embark upon the path of modernity and supposedly superior Western rationality that many experts perceive as the ideal. As a consequence, SSR and other rather unsuccessful development attempts have led to very negative discourses among international experts, ranging from open incomprehension to covert racism, mostly denying Bissau-Guinean institutions’ capacities and willingness to pursue the road towards development. It thus seems only natural that the EU, for example, – following a bottom-up needs assessment in the security sector in about 2006 – pursued a strict policy of implementing the initially agreed-upon reforms and minimized the scope of influence Bissau-Guinean institutions might have. Local ownership was largely conceived as a single input at the beginning, not as a continuing process (cf. Mannitz 2014: 273). Apparently, staff of Bissau-Guinean institutions felt misunderstood as a result of ambiguous signals and word choices by the EU, or even did not understand very well the complex system of supervisory bodies implemented for the EU’s SSR mission. While Bissau-Guinean counterparts were, at best, perceived as passive by foreign observers, when the government took the initiative and tried to influence the way the SSR was conducted, the EU blamed their “partners” for retreating from the agreed upon road map (Girão de Sousa 2013; cf. Kohl 2014). Hence, constructive reactions in the form of the conciliation and integration of views and demands that should have taken place were limited. Instead, the EU representatives insisted on their “correct” standpoint. When I talked to EU representatives in Bissau more than two years after the termination of the EU-SSR mission, the responsible personnel at the time had already been replaced. Thus, the frequent shifts of experts and the paramountcy of short-sighted project cycle logics and their inherent constraints and requirements (obedience to pre-formulated, fixed project goals and project steps and financial pre-specifications, an orientation to quick success, etc.) contribute little to a profound review and immersion into local expectations, perceptions, and dynamics of SSR, and make a fundamental re-routing of projects almost impossible (cf. Mannitz 2014: 274).

Another factor – both in Guinea-Bissau and other Global South countries – appears to be foreign consultants, many of whom are based in the Global North with little insight into what precisely is going on on the spot, because they stay in the project countries only for shorter periods of time. Although it appears that they contribute to the dissemination of certain norms – which they may also transfer to other geographic and cultural settings – it can be assumed (based on observations repeatedly made in other civilian development projects in Guinea-Bissau and beyond) that in their case the effect of norms is even more limited, because they are usually fed with information and expectations primarily by those who run the international projects. Thus, for instance, UNDP’s codification of a customary law project was supervised by lawyers based in Portugal, while the final report of UNDP’s

legal projects such as CAJ and CENFOJ was drafted by a French expert who had been in Guinea-Bissau for only eight days (Bugnion 2013: 1). In other words, the possibility of positive effects of SSR norms that are attempted to be translated – or rather – transferred to Global South settings is largely ruled out, given the structural tendency of projects to only simulate translation in order to create the appearance of top-down norm transfers.

This appraisal was confirmed when I took part in an international training course in an EU country in November 2013 that sought to familiarize participants – almost exclusively with a strong background in military, police or development cooperation – with SSR concepts and approaches. Although the necessity of local ownership was stressed repeatedly, the emphasis was, in my understanding, nonetheless on social engineering, that is how international institutions have the right to give instructions because they are the donors, and thus why they have both the right and the obligation to transfer certain SSR norms. In other words, a participatory, discursive façade is maintained, a façade that primarily serves to justify (attempted) foreign, normative interventions to the outside world and negate accusations of (neo-)colonial imposition. At the same time, many expatriate experts – who as a result of their professional security-sector background often lack any understanding of and/or sensitivity to development-theoretical and social-anthropological issues – display a belief in and an acceptance of the necessity of a North-South norm transfer, which they equate with modernity and progress. Yet, the fact that UN police officers revealed to me (conversations, UNIOGBIS police staff, Bissau, September 29, 2014) that they would in fact rather work more closely with their Bissau-Guinean colleagues on the ground than do office paperwork showed the limited nature of co-operation and communication, and the dominance of bureaucratic project logics that afford little room for beneficial changes resulting from SSR norm transmission, in Guinea-Bissau and other countries alike. Simultaneously, these statements also underlined the disparities and thus power asymmetries embodied in SSR projects. Power asymmetries in Guinea-Bissau's SSR arena were constructed and maintained by hiding top-down transfer approaches under the umbrella of failed vernacularization attempts or by simulating the translation of SSR norms, ideas and practices.

### *3.2 The Politicization of SSR and Power Reconfigurations*

However, SSR in the form just described not only creates and reproduces power asymmetries, but even generates power reconfigurations that may trigger political instability and aggravate conflicts – contrary to SSR's objectives of the rule of law, stability, and socio-economic development. In the Bissau-Guinean context, this was exemplified by certain SSR elements that were pushed forward by the EU's SSR mission, such as the creation of a paramilitary National Guard. The National Guard provoked distrust and resistance among the military leadership who regarded the new force as a potential adversary. Its creation thus seriously interfered with Guinea-Bissau's fragile power arithmetic, and contributed to a military coup that was staged in April 2012 (Kohl 2014: 9, 13, 20). Hence, SSR actually contributed to the exact opposite of what it had pretended to achieve, highlighting its function as a façade consisting of international misunderstandings, vernacularizations gone wrong, simulation of translation, and false estimations.

Apart from such country-related power reconfigurations, SSR has been also politicized at international level, turning into a political football of (geo-)political interests in Guinea-Bissau. For instance, bilateral donors such as Angola, Brazil, Portugal or China, and to some extent also ECOWAS, dominated by Nigeria, Senegal and Ivory Coast, were able to use SSR as a façade for in reality pursuing external policy objectives: Angola, like Guinea-Bissau a former Portuguese colony, intended to extend its influence over the small African country,

thus challenging ECOWAS's sphere of influence and continuing a power struggle that had begun in Ivory Coast. There, the Angolan government had supported President Laurent Gbagbo until 2010, enraging several ECOWAS countries. Portugal, as Guinea-Bissau's former colonizing power, continues to regard the country as lying within its sphere of interest, against French claims that resulted, in the mid- to late 1990s, in several controversies (cf. Matos e Lemos 1999: 35–36). Apparently, Portugal was among the main advocates of the EU's EU-SSR mission, presumably because of these interests but also because of rising numbers of refugees and drugs passing through or originating from the small West African country (Kohl 2014). By contrast, Brazil (cf. Abdenur and Neto 2014), at the time widely regarded a political and economic emerging power, attempted to make its role and aspirations as a new global player felt by supporting SSR. The People's Republic of China, whose support of the Bissau-Guinean armed forces consisted exclusively of material donations, had economic interests in the country and also intends to prevent the government from re-recognizing the Republic of China on Taiwan. Thus, in other words, SSR can also be conceived of as an aspect of foreign policy, and is therefore anything but a power-free space. From this perspective, SSR can be regarded as an arena that may also lead to power reconfigurations and might also serve as a façade to mask the power ambitions of certain states, as the case of the Angolan peace missions suggested. These peace missions were officially declared to constitute support of SSR, but actually also served to translate power politics and to simulate a genuine, politically neutral SSR commitment.

Power reconfigurations can also be detected in another respect. In the previous section I have already argued that international institutions such as the UN can sometimes act as a state within a state that create flash-in-the-pan façade structures that the government is unlikely to maintain once a project is handed over to local responsibility. By then, the international organization that implements an SSR project can be regarded as the actual responsible authority – and not the state itself. This was demonstrated to me when I witnessed a conversation between a police officer at Bissau's model police station and an expatriate UNIOGBIS policeman. The former was complaining about the heat in the police station and demanding that air conditioning should be installed. In doing so, he called the UNIOGBIS personnel "sponsors" of the model police station, thus exhibiting his understanding of the UN as the factual, project-executing entity accountable for the police department (observations, Bissau, September 25, 2014). In other words, as a result of the neglect by the government, notably the interior ministry, and the very limited concern of their superiors that many police officers complained about, they did not regard the state as the "local owner" of the entry point project, but rather the international institution that had the money and was regarded as the correct addressee for any requests, such as the case of behind the scenes driving (cf. also Kohl 2015a: 18). Most striking, however, was the true ownership issue illustrated to me when I went to the model police station for the first time on September 8, 2014. Prior to the visit, I had talked on the cell phone to an UNIOGBIS official who promised me that the visit to the station would be facilitated by his organization. When I arrived at the station, the local police officers did not know anything about it and reacted in a negative way. I phoned back to UNIOGBIS and was handed over to a colleague of my first contact, who said that he would come as soon as possible; he was apparently more than surprised that I had found the way to the police station on my own, and upon my arrival was also surprised that I was able to speak in Kriol to the police officials. The Latin American UNIOGBIS official praised – with the nodding approval of the station's commander – the "different mentality" supposedly prevailing at the model police station. Yet, he virtually ignored the commander as the representative of the state, actually treating him like a spectator. Thus, there was no question that UNIOGBIS was in fact the

master of the establishment. In a similar vein, I was also able to enter Bafatá's correctional facility. There were no questions from among the prison's personnel, notably the director, about my status, no questioning of my intentions or my legitimacy. Perhaps it was also my physical appearance as a "white" European that facilitated the access. Hence, here as well, not the Bissau-Guinean state but rather institutions from among the international community can be considered to be the owners of the SSR. Local ownership is simulated while true ownership is camouflaged.

Such perceptions that are sometimes also shared by parts of the "ordinary" population can result in an overestimation of power and competences attributed to projects implemented by international organizations, in the belief that institutions such as CAJ could actually outplay other state institutions outside the scope of the project – something apparently expected by some citizens. For instance, a group of villagers who had been affected by a murder case in their hamlet of Geba in 2014 were deeply disappointed by security and justice institutions' investigations. Consequently, following the UNDP's radio campaigns promoting its CAJ, two of my acquaintances and an elder decided to consult Bafatá's recently opened CAJ. There, one of the legal experts explained that the CAJ could arrange for a lawyer, whom they would not have to pay for as they did not have the necessary financial means to do so (various interviews and conversations, villagers and external relatives, Geba and Bafatá, September 15–20, 2014; see Kohl 2015c). Yet, when I arrived in Bafatá in mid-2014, little progress had been made and the villagers felt poorly informed and kept in the dark by the CAJ. This again raised the question of the extent to which externally built institutions such as CAJ could actually survive in an environment marked by practices that are normatively perceived as "bad" and "corrupt" by international experts and human rights activists.

The question whether it is powerlessness or indifference that decided CAJ's actions can be also raised. For example, CAJ enjoyed the right and the duty to visit correctional facilities and police lockups, two of which were located in Bafatá. As an outside observer, I was very keen to become familiar with these facilities, yet I had to beg the CAJ personnel to actually arrange a visit to the lockup at Bafatá's police station, a building that used to be a commercial building until it was expropriated by the newly independent Bissau-Guinean state in the 1970s. The lockup, a dark, moldy room with the smell of urine escaping as soon as a police officer opened the door, was located in an adjacent former small storeroom. In a corner, a handful of male prisoners crouched on the dirty black floor, sunlight only entering through a small hole in the roof. The CAJ lawyer quickly interviewed the prisoners, soon discovering that one or two were being held in custody beyond the legally stipulated maximum period. General remarks that the prisoners had the right to consult CAJ followed. Then the door was shut by a police officer and we left the building. The CAJ legal expert explained in response to my inquiry that he would have to inform the judge at Bafatá's court about the transgression of the arrest period. Later he informed me that he had postponed the visit for an indefinite period (participant observations and conversations, CAJ legal expert, police officers and prisoners, Bafatá, September 17, 2014). This behavior can be interpreted either as a lack of identification with his own work or as an attempt to avoid interfering with and challenging the local power balance. The latter interpretation speaks against a power reconfiguration and instead supports the idea of subordination to existing power arrangements, implying that CAJ was actually staging (or simulating) a new era.

A reproduction of power structures also took place in another, non-desirable way, from a normative point of view. During a CAJ legal sensitization mission – in the past carried out by the LGDH – to the sectoral seat of Cossé in Bafatá Region (group interview and participant observation, Cossé, September 16, 2014), I observed how the representatives of the

CAJ reproduced gender and age and thus power inequalities by inviting local notables to a meeting where the work of the CAJ was presented. Few people actually spoke about their problems and conflicts, perhaps because they feared the presence of some of the dignitaries. Further, the CAJ technicians briefly introduced services that CAJ offered but did not come up with concrete solutions for the problems that members of the community portrayed in the local Fula language. Rather, they were very general and abstract. I could not avoid the impression that the CAJ team considered their excursion more of an onerous duty than as an opportunity to open up new avenues to the villagers. It can be assumed that the two legal experts, who had an urban background and were well trained, may have unconsciously looked down on the rural population, not taking some of their issues seriously. Thus, SSR is not only about power reconfigurations but also about the reproduction of existing power asymmetries – power asymmetries that UNDP has actually vowed to reduce or even eliminate by means of projects such as CAJs. To put it differently: the CAJs created a façade of potential assistance, yet many citizens experienced disappointment when CAJ's experts could not keep their promises, obviously subordinating themselves to prevailing socio-cultural and institutional power structures and constraints. Again, these illustrations demonstrated the limitations of entry point projects in what could normatively be called a “hostile” environment. In fact, these examples support the diagnosis of simulated translation of SSR contents.

### *3.3 The Creation of New Structures of Domination*

Other approaches chosen by the international community may ultimately not only result in a reproduction of existing power asymmetries but even in the creation of new structures of domination as a result of simulating modern participatory approaches and techniques in an unprofessional fashion. This applies to UNDP's and the EU's joint project on the codification of so-called “customary law” (Guerreiro 2011; Loureiro Bastos n.d; Faculdade de Direito de Bissau/Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa n.d.). However, more than ten years after the report was submitted, implementation into national law was still pending. Ironically, the codification of “customary law” can be seen as the result of the weak-state debate – a concept repeatedly and rightly criticized (e.g., Huria 2008; Bethke 2012). After structural adjustment programs implemented in the 1980s and 1990s by the IMF and the World Bank had weakened African states to such an extent that many of them were no longer able to maintain their patronage systems and to sustain the inflated, centralized state apparatus, the state was even too weak to guarantee the rule of law (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005: 389 and also Berman 1998: 336–337). As a result, “traditional” legal institutions were identified as a way out of the crisis of state-centered conflict resolution. Given that a majority of conventional rule of law projects often lacked any aspect of being locally owned (Hurwitz 2005: 353-354), the codification of supposed customary law could be presented by the UNDP and the EU as an attempt to make a crucial contribution to a bottom-up collection of legal norms and thus a culturally appropriate and translated rule of law. As I have shown in detail elsewhere (Kohl 2020), the joint project's final report was tabled in November 2014, and included detailed results about legal customary norms among six “most relevant” ethnic groups (Loureiro Bastos n.d.: 17). In 560 pages the report (Faculdade de Direito de Bissau/Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisa n.d.) juxtaposed state laws and legal norms collected from the Balanta, Fula, Mancanha, Manjacos, Mandinga, and Papel ethnic groups. The study was divided into six sections: traditional authority; mechanisms of conflict resolution in civil and criminal law; the situation of women; property and land use; family and inheritance matters, as well as crime and punishment. On the one hand, a crucial methodological criticism arises from the fact that instead of observing the resolu-

tion of conflicts in villages, researchers – mostly trained lawyers – limited their research to conducting interviews. However, participant observation would have added value as it offers the advantage of revealing the differences between verbal-normative statements stemming from interviews and social practice (Spittler 2001: 16). However, such a procedure is very time-consuming. On the other hand, and of even more concern, the project design and some comments from employees who carried out the survey reveal a fundamentally reified understanding of culture and society. Tacitly or explicitly, ethnic groups were conceived of as discrete entities with clear-cut boundaries and a well-defined, unique cultural “content”. Thus, they were not understood as the product of human action, in other words as social constructions based on subjective processes of identitarian boundary construction and maintenance vis-à-vis other groups. The project approach resembled a journey through time, back to the colonial era when pre-colonial Africa was imagined as “a land of tribes,” separated from other “tribes” “as if they were differently coloured billiard balls.” (Lonsdale 1994: 132; cf. Berman 1998: 320; Cutolo 2010: 537):

The most far-reaching inventions of tradition in colonial Africa took place when Europeans believed themselves to be respecting age-old African custom. What were called customary law, customary land-rights, customary political structure and so on, were in fact *all invented by colonial codification*. (*Ranger 1983: 250; emphasis in the original*)

The codification of supposed “customary law” both historically and in the present should therefore be viewed with caution:

Nowhere was this more evident than in the definition of customary law, governing such crucial issues as marriage and access to land and property, which was supposed to be administered by the chiefs and headmen. Relying on its local allies as sources of information on what was expected to be a fixed and consistent body of rules, the colonial state allowed chiefs, headmen and elders to define a customary law that asserted and legitimated their power and control over the allocation of resources against the interests of juniors, women and migrants. Codified custom concealed the new colonial balances of wealth and power. (Berman 1998: 321)

What has been portrayed by both UNDP and EU as an ambitious bottom-up project dedicated to ensuring legal local ownership, turns out on closer observation actually to be an implicit neo-colonial endeavor, aiming at the reconfiguration of power structures at the expense of vulnerable groups such as women, younger generations and latecomers (Kopytoff 1987) by potentially cementing, in a quite unreflected fashion, the power of interpretation of men, the rich, and elders, and reinforcing politicized ethnic divisionism and factionalism. To this end, old patterns of domination are authenticated, prolonged or even revived and legitimized in written form, meaning supposed legal norms collected and codified by lawyers. In this process, power and vernacularization are closely interwoven, and the project can be interpreted as a mere façade for concealing power-political interests. The Bissau-Guinean example – indeed a job creation scheme for the many local young, aspirant lawyers – showed how vernacularization can go wrong, actually ending up in a simulation of methodological and conceptual forms and a reproduction of questionable assumptions if historical and socio-political insights as well societal class, gender, age, and economic issues are not sufficiently respected or considered. Simultaneously, this case could be regarded as yet another attempt to incorporate a project into the wider SSR realm and market it too under the SSR “brand” – or façade – for the sake of selling success – because otherwise SSR cannot point to many reputable achievements in Guinea-Bissau.

### 3.4 *Vernacularization the Other Way Around: Local Ownership*

However, power issues are a prerogative of neither the main international SSR actors nor their projects implemented on site in Guinea-Bissau. In fact, there were mechanisms through which Bissau-Guinean SSR key stakeholders were able to translate local ownership in ways not desired by international actors. Through these, they exerted ownership to some extent and simulated, or rather caricatured – presumably to their own benefit – the local ownership paradigm championed by international donors. By portraying themselves as powerless and reluctant, influential local actors and networks were able to present themselves as important, as local agents who wanted to have a say in SSR matters. In this way, they vernacularized in a specific way certain norms connected to SSR planning and implementation.

In other words, Bissau-Guinean protagonists were also able to play power games, knowing their own significance in approving development projects in general and SSR projects in particular. High-ranking government officials, we can assume, were well aware of the fact that was they who, as local or government owners respectively, had to, formally endorse SSR programs and projects in order for them to be implemented by international organizations. And certainly, they knew that the expatriate and local employees of international organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, had a strong interest in new projects being approved by Bissau-Guinean authorities, as jobs and money depended on the government's endorsement. On several occasions I heard in Guinea-Bissau that government officials delayed decisions, requested further information or documents or just did nothing at all, waiting for a template to be signed (e.g., interview, UNDP expert, Bissau, February 18, 2013; interview, non-governmental organization employee, Bissau, October 1, 2014). In the case of an Italian NGO that had developed a vocational training scheme for prisoners of Bafatá's correctional facility and put together a training workshop consisting of used, donated machines and other tooling equipment, the original contract between the Italian NGO and the ministry of justice expired in 2014. For months, both Italian and local project employees waited for a renewal. Repeated conversations with the newly appointed minister did not produce any results. As I was told, only upon the intervention of the prime minister himself was an extension granted and the project able to continue after months of standstill (interview, non-governmental organization employee, Bissau, October 1, 2014). Such a ministerial maneuver may have suggested that responsible persons at the ministry had attempted to coerce the Italian organization, supposedly trying to extort favors (Bayart 2012) and other material benefits by means of the obstruction tactics. Or, it may be speculated that the minister and ministry personnel were simply inexperienced, lacking in confidence, unqualified, and/or possibly fearful of potential conflicts of interest with influential people from within the government and politics, that is of competing patronage networks. Various readings are possible, but the interpretation of crucial government officials being aware of their importance would underline the ambiguity of power constellations in SSR and other development cooperation sectors. From this perspective, depicting themselves as passive, powerless, subservient recipients of benefits from foreign, international organizations while following their own agenda may be regarded as a further façade within SSR. To a certain extent at least, such personal agendas among local government officials prevent a pure, top-down transfer of SSR norms, and support the hypothesis of a *de facto*, undesirable (from the donors' point of view) vernacularization of reform elements into Bissau-Guinean settings. Thus, even beyond normative ownership structures and formalized participatory processes, high-ranking local actors reveal a degree of ownership that results in the appropriation of SSR by local individuals and networks.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

What are the core lessons taught by the analysis of SSR practices in Guinea-Bissau? First and foremost, a norms transmission gap prevailed in Guinea-Bissau's SSR, that is, as various vignettes have shown, normative aspirations differ fundamentally from social practice. Social practice was dominated by undesired vernacularizations and the simulation of translations. This was, *inter alia*, demonstrated very obviously by the EU-SSR mission that pretended to respect local owners' (partly difficult to derive) demands (vernacularization) but in fact attempted to simply transfer SSR norms top-down by merely simulating a translation of forms. Yet, even projects such as the codification of customary law that appeared to act in the interest of the (rural) population actually ran the risk of only reproducing and reinforcing existing power imbalances and are characterized by a norms transmission gap because the valuable objective of supporting vulnerable groups could not be achieved.

Second, as I have pointed out SSR in Guinea-Bissau has established façades of reform which either reproduced or reconfigured the distribution of power. In some cases, this resulted from misconceptions among both international and national SSR practitioners, who often rejected the very idea of embedding projects in local contexts. They may have attempted to impose certain practices, but in many cases, they eventually failed and – from their own point of view – undesirable results were the consequence. In this case, the application of their own power failed, but, conversely, they may have contributed to a reproduction or even reconfiguration of local power dynamics and arrangements of domination, as the codification of customary law, the CAJ sensitization missions, or – at another level – the geopolitical animosities between ECOWAS and Angola illustrate. Conducive to these processes were, on the one hand, inflexible, short-term project logics and environments which restricted innovations and the time that needed to be dedicated to project implementation, as in the cases of EU SSR or UNIOGBIS's police sector reform. On the other hand, many experts had little familiarity with the country and its socio-cultural, historical, political, and economic peculiarities. Importantly, this applied not only to expatriates (as the example of the police specialist and her planned media project showed) but also to Bissau-Guinean experts who worked in the country's interior, as suggested by the behavior revealed by CAJ personnel during our excursion to Cossé.

Third, success, or rather the "selling" of success, was important, and may have consequently contributed to insensitive and unconsidered approaches that leave little time and few opportunities for concentrating on project details and corresponding social, political, cultural, and economic issues. Consequently, power configurations may have been reproduced or altered in a way that runs counter to the originally intended general thrust of the SSR project. However, even projects that were verbally committed to bottom-up approaches could reproduce or recreate problematic power arrangements, as exemplified by the codification of customary law project or the legal sensitization missions that reproduced existing generational and gender differences. Even supposedly bottom-up projects could trigger "a chain-reaction of consequences which are not only unplanned, but sometimes undesirable as well" (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996: 19).

Fourth, as the case of Guinea-Bissau also shows, modernization, development, and progress were still powerful concepts. They were often associated with technical solutions, but both international experts and locals of different backgrounds would welcome appropriate projects, although for diverging reasons. Given the meager results of an SSR with more extensive goals, the (re-)construction of buildings (such as, *inter alia*, in Bissau and Bafatá), as well as the sometimes scarcely useful donations of equipment were thus celebrated as success stories.

Fifth, and similarly to material approaches, SSR toolkits, that erect lighthouse projects and aim at the identification of most promising entry points, were often implemented because they promised quick implementation. However, the entire social, political, economic, etc. embedding of these projects was often weak, and this was why they may not have produced the results that had been originally planned. What emerged were frustration and negative discourses on local incapacity that may have partly reflected reality, but also resulted from Eurocentric stereotyping, as especially the examples relating to the model police station and police training showed. Again, the belief of many experts in the superiority of Global North norms, concepts, ideas, planning, etc. was counterproductive and did not contribute to a vernacularization process, let alone a circulation of ideas, which, in turn, in a vicious cycle, aggravated the failure of projects to function. Especially in the case of Guinea-Bissau, negative discourses among international experts were common. By not questioning their projects' designs they revealed a profound lack of understanding of local dynamics, norms, power ambitions, and economic interests below the surface, making the construction of façades to disguise shortcomings and failure necessary.

However, sixth, Bissau-Guinean actors were more than mere puppets; rather, to some extent and in some contexts, they demonstrate ownership in using SSR and the dependence of international donors on the government's approval.

In their sum, these interactions made SSR in the case of Bissau-Guinea a façade from various perspectives. Attempts to transfer SSR norms and undesirable vernacularizations top-down have to be hidden under the normative, official vernacularization methodological façade. Building renovation or construction, as well as hasty donations serve as a façade to disguise the failure of structural reforms. Similarly, lighthouse or entry point projects serve as exemplary façades that are supposed to make the success of SSR visible; however, a look behind the façades underline the limitations and shaky foundations on which these projects grounded.

How could future reform endeavors be improved to ensure sustainability? One serious shortcoming is the short and static project cycles and low levels of financing that often undermine the longer-term SSR efforts. Financial resources should be secured and long-term cooperation (decades rather than a few years) with local Bissau-Guinean actors on the ground – as inclusive and as far-reaching as possible – sought. The case of the CAJ, which are still partly supported by the UNDP, seems to suggest such a rethinking, at least in part. Standing costs, such as decent salaries and financial administrative support could help to design SSR in more flexible ways and to guarantee the commitment of civil servants to the reforms. This would allow problems to be analyzed and solutions to be developed in a comprehensive way. Furthermore, improved and deeper cooperation above and beyond the diplomatic and ministerial levels could prove effective here. More generally, grassroots analyses of fundamental problems within the security sector combined with useful and sustainable equipment and basic practical training in the fundamentals of skills and ethics could help to overcome shortcomings. Apart from this, increased incorporation of the security sector's middle management could also have had positive effects on the realization of SSR in Guinea-Bissau – and in many other settings as well.

Ideally, in practice SSR should emphasize its normative promises and be refined into a truly integrated, long term, and multidimensional concept that particularly integrates bottom-up approaches by building on well grounded, thoroughly researched, and concerted processes (implying continuous rather than short-term participatory approaches and a high degree of both internal and external communication, and thus time and funding). These should be planned and implemented by multidisciplinary teams that integrate security experts, social and cultural scientists, development specialists, etc. If these recommendations had been

adopted, SSR could have turned into a success story – in Guinea-Bissau and elsewhere.

Over the past few years, the window of opportunity that existed in Guinea-Bissau between 2005 and 2010 has closed. SSR is no longer a political priority—neither in Guinea-Bissau nor among international partners. This is also evident in the closure of UNIOGBIS at the end of 2020 and the current government in Guinea-Bissau, which has openly abandoned liberal values in the security sector more than ever before in the past twenty years—despite lip service to the contrary. Indeed, numerous loose ends have emerged today: As a result of the failure to substantially implement SSR, donors have instead settled for fragile facades, and the root causes of many of Guinea-Bissau's security sector remain: legislative processes and restructuring in the armed forces and police were often never completed. The lack of a pension system for retired soldiers remains unresolved, meaning they cannot formally retire but instead serve into old age, or young relatives ultimately «take over» for their elderly comrades. The domestic political processes of the last ten years or so have also not been conducive to the final implementation of SSR – a related factor is declining donor interest: Parliament has been effectively incapacitated for several years due to repeated dissolutions by the president, elections have been repeatedly delayed, and the president is increasingly openly striving to remain in power despite exceeding his mandate (Birchinger and Té 2024; Kohl 2023, 2024, 2025). One way to increase the chances of success of security sector reforms would be through genuine self-determination or greater participation of local government institutions and the civilian population, as well as a stronger grassroots orientation of cooperation. Increased grassroots orientation should be achieved through the involvement of lower and middle levels of local security sector actors as well as focus groups from the population. At the same time, donors should provide more realistic timelines for project implementation and adjustments – in order to be able to take new, changed framework conditions into account as the project progresses. At the same time, those who enter countries of the Global South, who often come as «technicians» and see themselves as «social engineers,» should be increasingly selected based on criteria such as their ability to demonstrate an understanding of local concerns, challenges, and backgrounds and to implement projects with appropriate flexibility. At the same time, however, the diplomacy and foreign policy of donor nations should also seek closer exchange with the countries concerned and insist on the sustainable and constructive implementation of the commitments made by states such as Guinea-Bissau.

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