



## Citizens and Security Sector Reform in Gambia's Democratic Transition: Fostering Dialogue and Informed Civic Discourse

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Tucked perfectly inside Senegal and closely following the meandering curves of the River Gambia, The Gambia has the smallest landmass and population in continental Africa. Though a small state, the Republic of The Gambia enjoyed an enviable record of political stability and social harmony.<sup>1</sup> Not only that, but The Gambia was also successful in projecting the values of peace, democracy, and liberal internationalism in its international engagements during the First Republic under the stewardship of Sir Dawda Kairaba Jawara.<sup>2</sup> However, The Gambia's path to building a liberal constitutional order at home and promoting the values of peace, stability, and public order on the international stage was disrupted by the 1994 military coup led by then-Colonel Yahya Jammeh. While President Jammeh returned The Gambia to electoral democracy in 1996, the restriction of civic and political space turned elections into mere rituals, devoid of free and fair competition. Thus, considering numerous other

non-democratic tendencies under Jammeh, The Gambia effectively became an 'authoritarian democracy.'<sup>3</sup>

The Gambia's political trajectory witnessed a seismic shift with the electoral defeat of then-President Yahya Jammeh by the relatively unknown opposition coalition candidate, Adama Barrow, in the 2016 presidential election—despite Jammeh's tight grip on power and control over state institutions, including security agencies.<sup>4</sup> The political environment leading up to the 2016 presidential election provides context for explaining the distinct outcome of this

1 See Saine, A.; Ceesay E. and Sall E. (2013) Preface. In A. Saine; E. Ceesay and E. Sall (Eds.) *State and society in The Gambia since independence: 1965-2012* (pp. XXVII-L), Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, p. IX.

2 See; Saine; Ceesay and Sall, "Improbable" Gambia: Three dialogical strands, 2013, pp. xxvii-xxxi.

3 For discussion on the conduct of elections by authoritarian regimes and the whole concept of "electoral authoritarianism" see; Levitsky, S. and Way, L. A. (2010). *Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Gandhi, J. and Lust-Okar, E. (2009). Elections under authoritarianism. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 12: 403-422. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060106.095434>; Lindberg S. (2006a). *Democracy and elections in Africa*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press; Schedler A, Ed. (2006). *Electoral authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publisher; Diamond L. (2002). Thinking about hybrid regimes. *Journal of Democracy* Volume 13, No. 2, pp: 23-35.

4 Njie, E. & Saine, A. (2019). Gambia's 'billion year' president: The end of an era and ensuing political impasse. *Journal of African Election*, 18 (2): 1-24. <https://www.eisa.org/pdf/JAE18.2Njie.pdf>

election compared to previous ones since 1996. The historic merger of seven opposition political parties, the agreement among these parties to select a relatively independent candidate to lead the united opposition front, the jailing of key opposition figures, and Jammeh's unguarded and often provocative statements against certain ethnic groups, especially the Mandinkas, all contributed to fostering a unified citizen voice and a collective resolve for electoral action against Jammeh's government.<sup>5</sup>

The electoral turnover signalled a new beginning for The Gambia. However, given the systematic undermining of state institutions during Jammeh's twenty-two-year rule, the transition also left the new government with a plethora of pressing constitutional, institutional, and social issues that needed to be addressed.<sup>6</sup> With support from regional institutions and development partners, the new democratic government initiated various reform processes to tackle these challenges.

While The Gambia has made progress in its reform efforts, challenges remain—particularly regarding citizens' understanding of the reform agenda and their engagement with the reform process, especially in security sector reform. Recognizing the importance of civic engagement, a roundtable was convened on **"Deepening Citizen Engagement in Security Sector Reform and Governance in a Transitioning Gambia: Making a Case for Civic Discourse and Dialogue."** The roundtable, which featured high-level participation from security institutions, the Ministries of Defence and Interior, and civil society organizations, was hosted by the Centre for Research and Policy Development in partnership with the Peace and Security Competence Centre of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in August 2024.

This policy brief draws on participants' contributions during the roundtable discussions, available literature, and media

coverage. It highlights the centrality of citizen engagement in the security sector reform and governance process in The Gambia following the democratic transition. The brief also offers recommendations on how to strengthen citizen engagement with the security sector reform and governance process through dialogue, collaboration, cooperation, and mobilizing support for the process to foster accountable, transparent, responsive, and credible security institutions that submit to civilian control, prioritize human rights, and advance the human security of Gambians.

## REFORM AGENDA IN A DEMOCRATIC GAMBIA

Following the transition, President Adama Barrow's government embarked on important policy reforms aimed at delivering justice for victims of human rights abuses, strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting peacebuilding. A key component was the transitional justice program, marked by the establishment of the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparation Commission (TRRC). Following extensive deliberations closely followed by Gambians, the TRRC submitted its draft report to the President of the Republic on November 25, 2021, and a government white paper, developed to guide the implementation of the report's recommendations, was released in May 2022.

Furthermore, a Constitutional Review Commission was tasked with drafting a new constitution for The Gambia. Although the constitutional review process had stalled, the recent re-introduction of the constitutional bill before the Gambian Parliament offers a glimpse of hope. The government also initiated the security sector reform and governance process.

Understanding the importance of a democratically governed security sector as the guarantor of democratic order, The Gambia's government launched the Security Sector Reform (SSR) and governance process in 2017. The reform of the security sector was conceived as part of national reconciliation and reconstruction efforts following Jammeh's twenty-two-year autocratic rule.<sup>7</sup> To this end, The Gambia's

5 For further discussion on the political environment and combination of factors that led to the defeat of Jammeh in the 2016 presidential election in the Gambia see; Njie, E. & Saine, A. (2019). Gambia's 'billion year' president: The end of an era and ensuing political impasse. *Journal of African Election*, 18 (2): p. 2.

6 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2018). *Gambia's road to democratic reform*. Spotlight. Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies Publication; Haiges, V. (2017). Gambia: Coping with dictatorship's legacy. Deutsche World, DW. 10th March. Access from <https://www.dw.com/en/gambia-coping-with-dictatorships-legacy/a-37889100>

7 Mutangadura, C. 2020. Security Sector Reform in the Gambia: What is at Stake? West Africa Report No 31. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, p. 3.

SSR process aims to enhance accountability, transparency, professionalism, and democratic control over the country's eight security institutions, namely:<sup>8</sup>

- The Gambia Armed Forces (GAF)
- State Intelligence Services (formerly the National Intelligence Agency)
- The Gambia Police Force (GPF)
- Drug Law Enforcement Agency-Gambia (DLEAG)
- Gambia Fire and Rescue Service (GFRS)
- Gambia Prison Service (GPS)
- Gambia Revenue Authority (Customs and Excise)
- Gambia Immigration Department (GID)

Undertaken with broad support from international partners, the SSR process encompassed the development of policy frameworks, the codification of the functions of oversight institutions through legislative actions, and the reform of structural, institutional, and operational procedures within the military, police, and intelligence services.<sup>9</sup>

One of the key policy frameworks produced in the context of the SSR process was the National Security Policy (NSP), launched in 2019—the first of its kind in The Gambia's history.<sup>10</sup> The NSP was built upon a 2017 security sector assessment report. A National Security Strategy (NSS), launched in 2020, provides a framework for implementing the NSP.<sup>11</sup> The third major policy framework, the Security Sector Reform Strategy (SSRS), was also launched in 2020.<sup>12</sup> All three frameworks were developed by The Gambia's government with input from local stakeholders and assistance from international partners. These documents were expected to provide strategic guidance for the country's

efforts at reforming its security institutions.<sup>13</sup> Recognizing the importance of robust coordination for implementing the objectives set out in these key national security strategy documents, the National Security Coordination Framework was also introduced. It is important to note that these legal frameworks have provided the foundation for various programs, initiatives, projects, and activities that security institutions have launched, undertaken, or completed since the SSR process began in 2017.<sup>14</sup>

The extensive reform agenda initiated by the new government has created opportunities to address critical governance deficits, particularly in the security sector. While there has been significant progress, The Gambia still faces a fragile political and social environment characterized by high public expectations. The broader reform agenda—especially in the security sector—continues to face constraints due to palpable political tensions, weak state institutions (particularly those responsible for oversight of security institutions), and a range of institutional challenges. These challenges include concerns regarding human rights knowledge and understanding within the security forces, notably the Gambia Police Force, the State Intelligence Services, and the Gambia Armed Forces.

Additionally, there have been concerns over the heavy-handedness of security institutions in policing protests, particularly by the Gambia Police Force, as well as the harassment and intimidation of dissenting voices within civil society. These issues, among others, have raised concerns about the state of security sector reform in The Gambia's democratic transition.

Key concerns include:

- The relationship between security institutions and Gambian citizens
- Responsible civil policing of protests
- Knowledge, understanding, and application of human rights principles by security institutions

8 *ibid*

9 *ibid*

10 Republic of The Gambia (2019). National Security Policy. Banjul: Government of The Gambia. <https://security-legislation.gm/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-Gambia-National-Security-Policy-28-5-19.pdf>;

11 Republic of The Gambia (2020). National Security Strategy of The Gambia. Banjul: Government of The Gambia. <https://ons.gov.gm/security-legislation/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/NSS-DD-21-MAY-2020.pdf>

12 Republic of The Gambia (2020). Security Sector Reform Strategy 2020-2024. Banjul: Government of The Gambia. [https://ons.gov.gm/security-legislation/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20200521-SSR-Strategy\\_Final.pdf](https://ons.gov.gm/security-legislation/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/20200521-SSR-Strategy_Final.pdf)

13 Badjie, Momodou (2020). National Security Strategy Development: Gambia Case Study. *Working Paper*, African Center for Strategic Studies.

14 For insights into the state and status of SSR implementation in the Gambia see; Republic of The Gambia (2024). The Status of the Gambian Security Sector as April 2024-National Security Adviser Briefing to the National Assembly. Banjul: Office of National Security. [https://ons.gov.gm/security-legislation/?dlp\\_document=the-status-of-the-gambian-security-sector-as-april-2024](https://ons.gov.gm/security-legislation/?dlp_document=the-status-of-the-gambian-security-sector-as-april-2024)

- Broader issues of civil governance and oversight of security institutions

To sustain and enhance the progress made in the security sector reform agenda so far, security institutions must cultivate an institutional culture of civic engagement within The Gambia's democratic transition process. Building trust and confidence between civil society actors and security institutions requires consistent engagement. This, in turn, requires the leadership of security institutions to nurture a culture of tolerance for constructive criticism from the public.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND SSR PROCESS IN THE GAMBIA

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

The multiplicity of actors involved in SSR has sometimes resulted in overlapping activities or conflicting objectives. Addressing this issue, Mutangadura has argued that the piecemeal approach to SSR implementation by various actors and international partners undermines the process in The Gambia.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the complexity arising from the involvement of multiple stakeholders has led to relatively low public awareness of SSR in The Gambia.<sup>16</sup> This has fostered a strong sense of public mistrust in the process and raised doubts about the government's commitment to implementing a holistic SSR program.

15 For detail on lack of coordination at strategic level and piecemeal implementation of SSR activities and programmes by State institutions in the Gambia, international partners and donor agencies see; Mutangadura, C. (2020). Security sector reform in the Gambia: What is at stake? *West Africa Report* No 31. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.

16 Mutangadura 2020.

## PROGRESS AMIDST CHALLENGES: CITIZEN OPINIONS ON THE GAMBIA'S SSR PROCESS

In a 2022 report titled "Assessment of the State of Security Sector Reform Implementation and Stakeholder Participation in Post-Authoritarian Gambia," submitted to CRPD, participants affirmed that the country had made notable progress in its SSR process.<sup>17</sup> The report emphasized that the revision of key legislations governing the role of security agencies and the adoption of strategic policy documents to guide the reform process are significant milestones. This position aligns with the perspectives of Barchet and Birchinger.<sup>18</sup>

The report also noted that Gambians have expressed concerns about numerous policy issues, institutional challenges, and structural barriers that need to be addressed by the government and the leadership of security institutions as the country advances in its SSR implementation.<sup>19</sup> This position has also been echoed by Mutangadura, Barchet, and Birchinger.<sup>20</sup> Some of the key policy issues and emergent concerns highlighted in the report were also raised by participants during the August 2024 roundtable discussion organized by FES PSCC & CRPD.

17 For discussion on the state of SSR implementation and stakeholder participation in the Gambia see; Saka, L. & Njie, S. (2022). Assessment of the state of security sector reform implementation and stakeholder participation in post-authoritarian Gambia. Brusubi: Centre for Research and Policy Development, CRPD.

18 Adrian Barchet and Sophia Birchinger highlighted the significance of the adoption of key legislation as one of the five key steps that they reported constituted progress in the implementation of SSR in The Gambia. For further discussion see; Barchet, A. & Birchinger, S. (2022). Security sector reform in The Gambia: The historical roots of current challenges. *Blog*, Peace Research Institute, Frankfurt PRIF. <https://blog.prif.org/2022/11/09/security-sector-reform-in-the-gambia-the-historic-roots-of-current-challenges/>

19 For further discussion on the challenges facing SSR in the Gambia see; Saka, L. & Njie, S. (2022). Assessment of the state of security sector reform implementation and stakeholder participation in post-authoritarian Gambia, CRPD.

20 For detail see, Mutangadura 2020. Security Sector Reform in the Gambia, Institute for Security Studies; Barchet & Birchinger, 2022. Security sector reform in The Gambia, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt.

## TRUST AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING BETWEEN CSOS AND SECURITY INSTITUTIONS

Roundtable participants emphasized the critical role of civil society organizations (CSOs) as a bridge between security institutions and the wider public. Structured engagement between security sector actors and CSOs could enhance coordination, improve collaboration, and ultimately facilitate progress in the SSR reform agenda. As one participant stated:

“It is important to emphasize the need to identify and bridge the communication gap between the people and security services. To this end, engaging CSOs—who serve as the mouthpieces of the people—is vital for effective SSR. Public forums like this roundtable are essential for bridging the gap between CSOs and security institutions.”<sup>21</sup>

Periodic public fora could promote informed public discourse on the SSR process, encourage critical reflection on progress, identify challenges, and propose solutions. Participants at the roundtable unanimously stressed the importance of regular public engagement in strengthening synergy between the people and security institutions. Thus, fostering cordial relations between CSOs and security institutions is crucial to the successful implementation of SSR in a transitioning society like The Gambia.

## HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED POLICING IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOCRATIZATION

On the topic of human rights-based policing within the context of democratization, participants at the roundtable emphasized the importance of balancing citizens’ rights with the provision of security. To this end, one of the participants highlighted “the importance of respecting fundamental human rights and freedoms of citizens in the context of policing by the Gambia Police Force (GPF).”<sup>22</sup>

In efforts to ensure that GPF personnel respect and protect citizens’ rights while carrying out their policing duties, a media actor noted that the media plays a crucial role in

popularizing the activities of security institutions, particularly the GPF.<sup>23</sup> The participant stressed the need for collaboration between media actors and security institutions. Such collaboration would not only help increase public awareness of the activities of security institutions but also serve as an essential tool for citizen education, sensitization, and mobilization. These efforts would, in turn, support security institutions in effectively discharging their constitutionally assigned duties and responsibilities to the people and, by extension, to the Gambian state.

Regarding enhancing the GPF’s capacity to integrate human rights protection and promotion into policing practices, one participant stated:

“There is a need to embed human rights principles in the legal frameworks that guide the operations of security institutions in the country. To this end, robust legal frameworks and oversight mechanisms must be established to hold law enforcement bodies accountable for illegal actions. Aside from this, continuous human rights training for security personnel and the implementation of a community-policing model are necessary to build trust between the people and security institutions, especially the GPF.”<sup>24</sup>

## PUBLIC ORDER ACT AND POLICING PROTESTS IN THE GAMBIA

The discussion on the Public Order Act<sup>25</sup> and the policing of protests in democratic Gambia sparked engaging and robust deliberations among roundtable participants. This is unsurprising, given the controversy that often surrounds public discourse on the Act, especially in debates over whether it should be repealed. Critics of the Act, particularly within civil society organizations (CSOs), have stridently argued that it is obsolete and constitutes a relic of Gambia’s authoritarian past. They maintain that the law should be repealed and, if necessary, replaced with a Public Order Act that is fit for purpose in a democratic society and allows the

21 Contribution by a participant (Lawyer and CSO Actor), CRPD-FES Roundtable on the theme, “Deepening Citizen Engagement in Security Sector Reform and Governance in Transitioning Gambia: Making a Case for Civic Discourse and Dialogue”. Tamala Beach Hotel, The Gambia, 7-8 August, 2024.

22 Comment by a participant at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

23 Comment by a participant at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

24 Comment by a participant at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

25 The Public Order Act was a colonial law enacted in 1961 at the twilight of British colonial rule in The Gambia. It was enacted primarily to minimize public gatherings and protest against colonialism and the colonial authority. Aside from minor amendments in 1963 and 2009, the Public Order Act has retained the same regulatory framework since its enactment. For details see; Public Order Act Cap 22:01 Revised Laws of The Gambia 2009.

Gambia Police Force to manage protests without resorting to force.

Originating in colonial times, the Public Order Act was designed to suppress rather than facilitate citizens' rights to free expression and assembly.<sup>26</sup> Some roundtable participants, including a senior police officer, expressed concerns about whether security personnel fully understand the provisions of the Act. The officer emphasized the need for clearer guidelines on what constitutes a security concern that justifies the denial of a protest permit and the use of force in policing protests.

Concerns over the potential misuse of the Public Order Act and certain provisions of the Criminal Code were highlighted by the 2024 charges of sedition and false publication brought against Musa Sheriff and Momodou Justice Darboe, two journalists affiliated with the Voice Newspaper. These events reflect broader fears among citizens regarding the

possible abuse of these laws to stifle freedom of assembly and expression.<sup>27</sup> Another participant called for a revision of the Public Order Act, stating:

"The Public Order Act is a colonial-era law whose provisions are outdated and often misinterpreted, leading to unnecessary restrictions on the right to assemble."<sup>28</sup> Finally, resource constraints faced by the police force may undermine its ability to effectively police large-scale protests. Assistance from development partners is widely regarded as a crucial factor in strengthening the capacity and efficiency of the police force.<sup>29</sup>

## NATIONAL SECURITY AND CITIZENS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Official secrecy is anchored in national security and at times conflicts with citizens' rights to information. Roundtable participants underscored the importance of protecting national security without undermining citizens' rights to access information, which, especially in the context of democratic transition, strengthens public trust in state institutions by enhancing public understanding of how government functions.

Yet, the implementation of the Access to Information (ATI) Act, which came into effect in 2021, has been slow, particularly the establishment of the Information Commission, which is responsible for overseeing the operationalization of the ATI law. It is imperative that the commission be set up in a timely manner and adequately funded. Civil society organizations (CSOs) should further intensify their efforts to sensitize Members of the National Assembly and the general public about the ATI law.<sup>30</sup>

26 Often cited as the most controversy in the Act is section 5 and section 6. For instance, section 5(2) mandate any person who wants to form a public procession in the City of Banjul or the Kanifing Municipality to first apply for a license to the Inspector General of Police, or if in the regions, to the Governor of the Region, or other person authorized by the President of the Republic as the case may be and if any of the aforementioned person is satisfied the procession is not likely to cause a breach of the peace, he or she shall then issue a license with conditions on which the procession is permitted to take place. Section 5(4) allows a Magistrate or any police officer not below the rank of Sub-Inspector to disperse unlicensed public processions or a procession which violates any of the conditions of a license issued under subsection 2. In the same vein, individuals that take part in unlicensed processions are liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a term of three years. See; Public Order Act Cap 22:01 Revised Laws of The Gambia 2009. Notable instances where the Act has been use as instrument to curtail the freedom of association and assembly and repress protest under the government of former President Yahya Jammeh include: the April 10th and 11th countrywide Students demonstration sparked by the alleged rape of a 13 year old schoolgirl by a paramilitary officer at a sports event at the Independence Stadium in Bakau, and beating to death of another secondary school student (Ebrima Barry) by fire services officers in Brikama; the forceful dispersal of protest led by Ebrima Solo Sandeng and other United Democratic Party youth activists in April 14th 2016. Following the forceful dispersal of the protest was the arrest, torture and death in custody of Ebrima Solo Sandeng; the July 20 arrest of United Democratic Party leader Ousainou Darboe and his executive for staging a procession demanding the release of the arrested youth leader and activists. For context, explanation and cases as it relates to the repressive nature of the Gambia's Public Order Act see, National Human Right Commission (2020). The National Human Rights Commission; The Gambia-Advisory Note on the Right to Freedom of Association and Assembly Vis-à-vis the Public Order Act. Kotu: National Human Rights Commission, The Gambia. <https://www.gm-nhrc.org/download-file/d35e2981-af67-11ea-9dc8-022a5fa1767e>; Jobarteh, M. (2018). Public Order Act: Civil and Political Rights in The Gambia. Law Hub Gambia, July 5. <https://www.lawhubgambia.com/lawhug-net/tag/Public+Order+Act>; Jobarteh, M (2017). Dissenting opinion: The Supreme Court and the Public Order Act. Standard Newspaper, November 28th. <https://standard.gm/dissenting-opinion-supreme-court-public-order-act>

27 The Standard Newspaper (2024). Human rights body condemns sedition and false publication charges against citizens. Press Release. The Standard Newspaper, Thursday 10 October, Vol 17, Issue 186, p. 2 & 12; The Point Newspaper (2024). Taal slams gov't for use of draconian laws against journalists. News Article, The Point Newspaper, 10 October, Vol 33, No. 186, p. 2.

28 Position expressed by a participant at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

29 Contribution by a participant (Senior Police Officer) at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

30 Contribution by a participant (media personality), at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

A Gambia Army officer reiterated the importance of safeguarding national security while ensuring public access to information:

“While transparency is crucial, certain information must remain confidential to protect national interests and public safety. To this end, clear guidelines need to be developed, in coordination with the military and government, to determine what constitutes sensitive information. This will enhance clarity on how to promote public access to information as enshrined in the ATI law.”<sup>31</sup>

Establishing a new body—or empowering previously existing independent oversight bodies—and charging them with the responsibility of ensuring that decisions to withhold information are justified and not misused is essential. Like existing literature on Security Sector Reform (SSR), the discussion emphasized the need to balance the protection of national security with public access to information.<sup>32</sup> Holding public discussions on these critical issues, particularly regarding national security and the operations of security institutions within the ongoing SSR process, is central to deepening democratic governance and practice in a transitioning Gambia.

## CONCLUSION

Navigating the complexity of implementing a successful Security Sector Reform (SSR) agenda in the context of democratic transition is a difficult and multifaceted task. It becomes even more challenging for a society emerging from decades of authoritarian rule, as the legal, structural, and institutional legacies of the old regime often create barriers that complicate implementation—even with the best intentions and political will.

While The Gambia has made significant progress in facilitating an impactful security sector reform, challenges remain. Seven years after the reform process began, the National Security Bill, which seeks to legitimize the Office of National Security (ONS) and the position of the National Security Adviser (NSA), has not been passed. There is also a noticeable lack of an SSR-CSOs Engagement Strategy and a Communication Strategy.

This lack of coordination in engagement, communication, and public discourse among SSR stakeholders and civil society actors—including CSOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs), and traditional institutions—has hindered the capacity of civil society actors to effectively educate, sensitize, and mobilize the public in support of the SSR process.


## RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges, promote civic dialogue around the reform agenda, and enhance citizen engagement in the process, the following recommendations were proposed:

- The National Assembly should fast-track the National Security Bill. The passage of this bill is critical as it will provide a legal framework for the Office of National Security and the position of the National Security Adviser. The ONS and NSA are essential in guiding security institutions and implementing SSR reforms.
- Decision-makers should formulate a Communication and CSOs Engagement Strategy to enhance structured community outreach, mobilization, sensitization, and education on security sector reform. Periodic engagement with CSOs—including traditional institutions, religious leaders, community leaders, and thought leaders—may promote a sense of local ownership of the reform process. Platforms for informed discussion may help bridge the trust gap between the civic public and security institutions.
- To build public support and a sense of ownership, raising awareness and knowledge of the SSR process should be prioritized through educational media programs. Community radio stations and social media influencers can play a crucial role in educating and sensitizing citizens about the SSR process.

31 Contributions by a participant (Senior Army Officer), at the CRPD-FES Roundtable.

32 See; Schafer, M.L. (2021). National security and access: A structural perspective. *Journal of National Security Law & Policy*, 11 (3): 689-742. <https://jnslp.com/topics/read/vol-11-no-3/>; Salau, A.O. (2017). The right to access to information and national security in the African regional human rights system. *African Human Rights Law Journal* 17(2): 367-389. [https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S1996-20962017000200003](https://scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1996-20962017000200003); Caidi, N. & Ross, A. (2005). Information rights and national security. *Government Information Quarterly* 22 (4): 663-684. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0740624X05000924>

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- Training manuals for security sector personnel should mainstream human rights and human security principles to foster continuous learning and inculcate a culture of respect for human rights and dignity within security institutions. This may facilitate a shift in organizational culture and align security sector operations with democratic principles and values.
  - Oversight bodies for security institutions must not only be established but also empowered. The National Assembly Committees on Defence and Internal Security must have enhanced capacity to effectively hold security actors accountable.
  - Laws and policies governing security institutions—including Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)—should be updated, particularly those regulating the Gambia Police Force (GPF), Gambia Armed Forces (GAF), and State Intelligence Services (SIS). Revising and amending outdated legal frameworks is necessary to enhance democratic policing and ensure the effective functioning of the security sector. New policies should not only be adopted but also effectively implemented.





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