Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

WFD

Understanding Politics and the Security Sector

A Practical Guide to Political Economy Analysis, Thinking and Working Politically, and Conflict Analysis in Security Sector Governance and Management

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Contents

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1. Introduction

This note offers practical guidance on how to use political economy analysis (PEA), thinking and working politically (TWP), and conflict analysis in security sector governance and management (SSGM). It is aimed at practitioners such as project leaders, advisors, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) specialists, and local counterparts who face the realities of SSGM: complex coalitions, overlapping mandates, contested authorities, and the risks of capturing programme benefits or backlash.

Following this introduction, Section 2 describes the common challenges facing SSGM programming and Section 3 introduces the basics of a PEA framework for SSGM. Section 4 presents various PEA-type analytical tools and approaches that can address these challenges. Section 5 offers good analytical practices in relation to SSGM. The note emphasises the importance of proportionate, 'right-sized' analysis – that is, only enough analysis to inform action.

SSGM is inherently political because it seeks to (re)shape who controls coercive and protective power, resources, and legitimacy. This means altering security priorities and presence, as well as the mechanics of the justice system.[1] Those who benefit from the status quo may resist these efforts, particularly the elites that security institutions often serve. Moreover, informal rules (such as patronage or factional loyalties) often override formal laws and procedures. Political economy analysis and other contextual analyses in SSGM facilitate the navigation of these realities. They do this by mapping various stakeholders' interests and incentives, identifying feasible entry points and coalitions, timing reforms to opportunities (such as budgets, leadership rotations, and legislative sittings), anticipating backlash and displacement effects, and embedding contextual analysis into MEL, so that programmes can adapt quickly rather than pursuing technical fixes that stall on contact with politics.

For more background on PEA and why analysis of the political, economic, and social context is critical for SSGM, read Sections 2 and 3.

For different options for conducting analysis on political and social contexts for SSGM, see Section 4 and Table 1. The tips in Section 5 will also be useful.

[1] For a comprehensive discussion of the importance of politics to SSGM, see the OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform, especially Sections 1 and 2.

2. Consequences of not incorporating PEA and TWP in SSGM

PEA and TWP arose from the recognition of frequent failures in the implementation of international development programmes and projects. In relation to SSGM, politically-informed and conflict-sensitive approaches were a response to sometimes disappointing results from decades of investment and the realisation that some international aid exacerbated conflict. The principal problems in SSGM that PEA and TWP can help to address include the following:

Unintended consequences

A lack of contextual awareness allows programmes to ignore their effects beyond the immediate outputs. Given the sensitive security issues involved in SSGM programmes, these unintended effects may include concerns about human rights or conflict sensitivity. These unintended effects may, in turn, put programmes at risk and cause reputational damage to their agency. They may also mean that the security sector is not oriented towards providing services to the intended population, but rather to serving elite interests.

The most common consequences are:

- **Conflict or human rights abuses worsen:** SSGM reforms can often backfire, as when they empower abusive actors, disturb power relations between security organisations, or skew support to particular ethnic or regional groups.
- **Reform capture and corruption:** Elite partners or beneficiaries may convert reforms into sources of income. For example, they may exploit increased security capability to control industries or checkpoints. They may also capture programme resources such as training allowances or procurement processes for their own benefit.

Limited strategic relevance

Programmes may function but have limited impact due to weak or contextually inappropriate theories of change. (A theory of change is a roadmap that explains how and why a specific programme or intervention is expected to create a desired social outcome. See the OECD DAC Handbook on Security System Reform.)

- **Technical misdiagnosis:** Programmes often move towards technocratic and broad 'security sector' programmes, rather than the specific 'governance and management' issues that might contribute to the problems. For example, some programmes simply aim to 'train and equip'. These programmes might distribute hardware (such as vehicles, radios, and information and communications technology (ICT)) and provide standardised training while neglecting the incentive structures that key security stakeholders face (such as promotions, patronage networks, institutional incentives, and procurement rents). Similarly, programmes may support new strategies, units, standard operating procedures (SOPs), or oversight bodies that exist on paper but fail due to ineffective accountability or to a lack of implementation or enforcement capacity.
- **Contextually irrelevant theory of change / pathways for change:** Programmes may depend on false assumptions (for instance, that communities trust the police or that there is a reliable

chain of command in which authority flows from formal ranks. These assumptions often underpin ineffective or unsustainable efforts. Instead, strategies should build on the customs and norms in each specific context. Successful SSGM programming is often about formalising useful informal efforts (such as pre-existing community policing), while highlighting more destructive efforts (such as the abuse of military powers).

Ignoring broader systems

Security systems operate within broader political, governmental, and social systems. When SSGM programmes fail to engage with these systems they often treat the symptoms rather than the cause. For example, internal accountability mechanisms in the police force are unlikely to have much impact if the justice system is not functioning to adjudicate and uphold claims. Likewise, efforts to establish gender-responsive policing or to increase the number of women in the defence forces are unlikely to have much impact without also addressing inequitable gender norms in the wider society. At the same time, programmes may focus on national systems when local systems offer the greatest opportunities (or the other way around).

Box 1: The Importance of Political Commitment in Sierra Leone

Following the civil war in Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Police Service, with UK support, established Family Support Units (FSUs) to provide a survivor-centred response to gender-based violence (GBV). Designed as specialised, confidential units based in police stations, FSUs combined trained investigators with psychosocial support, medical referrals, and links to legal aid to make reporting safer and more effective. Early evaluations and practitioners' accounts judged the model to be a success: FSUs increased reporting, improved evidence collection, and helped shift police culture towards treating GBV as a serious crime rather than a private matter. Encouraged by these outcomes, FSUs were introduced across the country. By 2014, there were 62 FSUs, although the 2014 quarterly budget for all FSUs nationwide (excluding recurrent expenditure) was just USD 270. Funding shortfalls undermined the quality and reach of services that FSUs were able to provide. This highlights how institutional innovation can achieve rapid gains, but sustained impact depends on predictable, sustained funding and political commitment.

Limited tactical effectiveness

Programmes might look good in principle but ignore the practical challenges that arise in a given context.

- **Working with ineffective partners:** While certain officials may be formally in charge, in practice other players may hold critical security responsibilities. A common mistake is to work only with the formal officials or leaders, resulting in limited uptake of programmes and reform efforts. Engagement with broader stakeholders can establish pressure for results and help to identify reform-minded actors.
- **Insufficiently broad support and mobilisation:** SSGM generally requires substantial support both from those directly affected by the reforms as well as other stakeholders, many of whom operate outside of the government. This is particularly critical to sustain reform beyond the life of the programme.
- **Working in the wrong way:** Different contexts require different protocols in terms of engaging power brokers, communicating with them in a particular way, and following certain procedures. If SSGM programmes do not adapt their protocols to the local context, some actors with the power to veto reforms (such as service chiefs, former warlords, political patrons, unions, and/or legislative committees) may block change.
- **Missed opportunities and roadblocks:** Without a political 'radar', teams fail to spot ripe moments for reforms (such as rotation cycles, budget windows, leadership transitions, and rising public discontent) or when roadblocks emerge that make existing strategies for change untenable. Equally teams can miss the real reasons why some issues persist, making assumptions about 'lack of political will' or 'rent-seeking' and missing far more significant factors shaping the context.

3. An overview of the PEA framework for SSGM

While potential problems are quite broad, certain concepts can help to understand the programmatic context. Together, these concepts – foundations, rules and norms, and actors – make up the main PEA framework (see Figure 1). (Figure 1 consists of three tiles arranged horizontally, each representing one of the main PEA concepts. These are underpinned by a cross-cutting tile labelled 'Synthesis', which represents the importance of analysing the interconnections between these three concepts.)

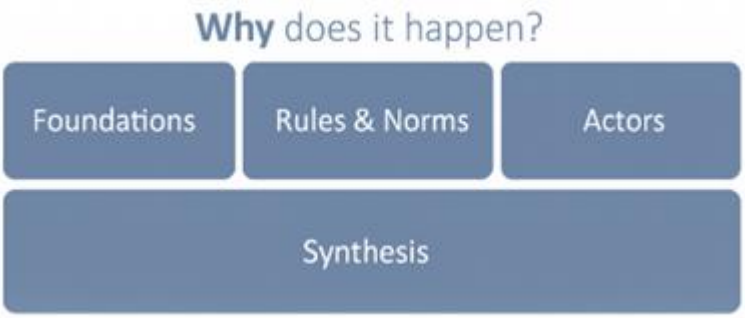

Figure 1. The PEA Framework

Foundations

Foundations refer to the fundamental, long-standing features of the social and political environments in which SSGM takes place. They may include: conflict legacies, political settlements, social cleavages, gender dynamics, the economic base (including resource rents), regional geopolitics, the media and technical ecosystems, bureaucratic capacity, and climate and/or geography. Reading these correctly shows what is structurally possible, where instability or backlash may emerge, and which outcomes are robust to elections or leadership turnover. In practice, foundations also inform where to work (hotspots vs. corridors) and how to frame reforms (narratives that resonate with communities and elites). Treat them as the constraints and tailwinds that make a theory of change plausible – or that might derail it.

Box 2: Political Settlements in SSGM

One critical foundation for SSGM programming is the political settlement, which often determines the level of stability or conflict in a given society. It is a tacit bargain or power equilibrium among elites, and between elites and their followers, which then establishes the basic rules for politics and the economy. It usually involves informal deals over the allocation and use of rents, and shapes how clientelism is used to buy loyalty. Violence is more likely when the elites included in the settlement are divided into factions or exclude parts of the population.

Rules and Norms

Security systems are shaped by both formal rules and informal norms. Formal rules include laws, policies, mandates, budgets, SOPs, and oversight statutes. Informal norms include customs, social norms, patronage, customary authority, and station-level practices. SSGM programmes are often more effective when interventions engage with existing formal and informal rules rather than ignoring them. Mapping the rules and norms which govern the sector helps to reveal the factors that may constrain reform efforts (such as procurement rent points, human resource incentives, or evidence gaps) and the feasible ways to bring about change (such as legal tweaks, budget codes, inspectorate powers, and equity and inclusion policies).

Actors

Actors are the people and organisations whose interests and incentives influence whether reforms stick: these will vary by context and could be a very diverse mix of groups and individuals. Key actors might include political leaders, service chiefs, commissions, prosecutors and courts, auditors and parliaments, intelligence services, politically connected private security companies, ruling party militias, youth wings, vigilantes, transnational organised crime actors embedded in security agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), the media, community authorities, regional or hostile actors, and wider criminal networks. Actors may also evolve over time, for example as a result of post-war integration efforts. The views and incentives of actors will also be subject to wider changes (such as economic shocks or opportunities).

Stakeholder analysis clarifies who supports or blocks change, what each actor stands to gain or lose, and how coalitions can be built to enable change. In designing SSGM programmes, insights into the relevant actors can help inform engagement strategies (who to empower and work with, who to condition or monitor), risk mitigation (human rights triggers, data access conditions), and ways to adapt when alliances or incentives shift. In this way, programme designers can turn political insights into operational choices.

Synthesis

PEA often stumbles when it ignores the relationship and interaction between these three areas (foundations, rules and norms, and actors). In SSGM, there is a need for an effective synthesis of these ideas, which can take a variety of forms. For instance, a synthesis may illuminate how power, incentives, and rules interact throughout the accountability chain: police → oversight (internal/external) → prosecutors → courts → corrections; and pinpoint the constraints that block improvements in safety and rights (such as patronage norms, failure to comply with file handover requirements, or rent-seeking in procurement). It may also identify influential actors outside of the formal accountability chain (see the ‘Focus on action’ recommendation below).

It might challenge assumptions, for example that while rent seeking helps to underpin a particular network it is only one factor among several. By looking at issues ‘in the round’, it is likely to unpack the durability or brittleness of configurations of power or current structures, such as why hybrid security orders persist even where incentives and commitments seem to work against these. It can also suggest the necessary reform coalition: which commanders, prosecutors, judges, legislators,

and CSOs can carry change, which spoilers can veto it, and the minimum protections, side payments or transparency needed to keep them neutral.

The synthesis can also map contradictions in formal and informal rules (for example, where statutes promise discipline, while rotations and political or managerial interference prevent it). It can also identify parts of the system which are mutually supporting and propose institutional tweaks that can shift real incentives, such as protected Internal Affairs postings, ring-fenced investigation budgets, or mechanisms to allow citizens to provide direct feedback.

By looking at the overall dynamics, the synthesis can also identify entry points for engagement – places where technical reforms align with political opportunities for change. For example, it might suggest a sequence and pace of reforms that link progress to budget cycles, leadership rotations, and legislative sittings. This helps to ensure that new investments - for example, forensic kits, laboratories, and case systems - are introduced alongside stronger accountability measures such as audits, publication of discipline statistics, or prosecutorial memoranda of understating.

The synthesis can also anticipate displacement effects – for example, when extortion or abuse simply shifts to another security unit - and identify measures to address them. It can make distributional and gendered impacts explicit, such as who gains or loses by rank, region, and sex, and this analysis can be used to broaden legitimacy and protect reformers. Finally, the synthesis can define specific political and operational signals - such as the percentage of case files transferred in less than 14 days, the tenure of Internal Affairs investigators, the survival of oversight lines in committees, or the number of retaliation complaints - that should trigger operational changes if they shift (or fail to shift).

Appendix 1 provides a more comprehensive list of the types of topics that can emerge from a PEA in SSGM. Of course, the precise topics will depend on the purpose and driving questions of the PEA.

4. Main types of analyses and approaches

Thinking and working politically (TWP), conflict sensitivity and political economy analysis (PEA) can seem like an 'alphabet soup'. The key point is that understanding the political, economic, and social context and then asking, "So what?", leads to better-informed and effective SSGM programmes with less chance of unintended negative effects. The concepts of foundations, rules, and actors mentioned earlier encapsulate the types of topics that are most relevant.

TWP provides a broad backdrop for this combination of understanding and action. It highlights that the context is not just background noise but the very terrain that policy-makers and practitioners must deliberately navigate. It treats politics as a space for purposeful engagement, using iterative and adaptive approaches to shape incentives and influence power holders. 'Iterative' means trying an approach, testing what happens, and refining it in the light of evidence; 'adaptive' means that programmes stay flexible and can change course as contexts shift or new information emerges.2

There are ten analytical tools that can help with developing this understanding of the SSGM context. Most of them are quite flexible and can be adapted to the purpose of the analysis and the specific topics of interest. The following list provides a brief description of each of these tools and links to further resources. Table 1 offers a menu of options for SSGM practitioners who are interested in using PEA and TWP to address specific aspects of their programmes.

Rapid or Ongoing Analysis

1. **Rapid stakeholder and power mapping** (one to three weeks): Identify principals, agents, veto players, beneficiaries, spoilers, and potential coalitions across stakeholders such as security organisations, oversight bodies, unions/associations, the executive, the legislature, and communities. Map formal vs. informal mandates, influence, rents, and alliances. See this this ODI toolkit and this Open University example.
2. **Quick PEA** (a few days): Undertake a rapid political economy analysis to understand key actors across the security and justice ecosystem (including their roles and incentives), bargaining processes (how do things get done), and structures (broad realities). See this resource.
3. **ASCOPE / PMESII** (half a day to 10 days): This quick-scan framework focuses on the civil terrain around a problem in a conflict zone. It covers: **A**reas (key places and boundaries), **S**tructures (physical assets like stations, courts, roads), **C**apabilities (what civilians/organisations can do – services, mobilisation, funding), **O**rganisations (formal / informal groups), **P**eople (influencers, demographics, vulnerable groups), and **E**vents (elections, strikes, festivals, budget cycles) and asks how each helps or hinders your objectives. PMESII seeks to describe systems that shape a country, region, or operating environment, and consists of Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information and Infrastructure. See this United States Marines Corps resource.

[2] See this FCDO guidance note on PEA and TWP and this useful note from the United Nations for more information.

4. **Human rights risk assessments** (half a day to five days): Screen human rights risks in SSGM programming with this tool by (1) assessing the country or partner's context and track record; (2) identifying specific risks that programmatic support (police, military, courts, prisons, intelligence) to which they could directly or significantly contribute; (3) mitigating these risks with specific safeguards (scope limits, oversight access, data-sharing rules, assurances, training/SOPs, monitoring); and (4) strengthening and monitoring compliance during the programme. The UK government version is called the Overseas Security Justice and Assistance Human Rights Guidance (OSJA).
5. **Problem tree / mind mapping** (one-day workshop): Use this tool to focus on programmes and analyses addressing the most critical problems. Identify the specific problem components of a larger challenge (such as insurgent recruitment), then describe the main causes of those components (ethnicity, civilian casualties, criminality, etc.). Then, if there is a need for deeper analysis, the team may conduct a problem-driven PEA. See this US Army resource (pp. 3-11) and this ODI resource.
6. **Ongoing political 'radar' as part of monitoring and adaptive management** (bi-weekly/monthly): Generate light-touch, iterative updates to capture shifts in political behaviour, alliances, upcoming decisions, and emerging risks. Monitor and test critical assumptions in the theory of change. See this practice guide by The Asia Foundation and this webinar report by the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice.
7. **Scanning-Analysis-Response-Assessment (SARA) model** (ongoing): Offers a structured, problem-solving approach that can be readily adapted to SSGM, particularly within policing and community-security components. Diagnose underlying causes, involve multiple stakeholders in designing tailored responses, and embed iterative assessment. See this College of Policing resource and this example from the UK.

Box 3: Integrating PEA in SSGM – The Solomon Islands Experience

The World Bank's Justice for the Poor (J4P) programme in Solomon Islands illustrates how political approaches can reshape the design and implementation of SSGM. Following the 1998-2003 conflict in Solomon Islands, J4P began by analysing how power, authority, and dispute resolution functioned at the local level, recognising that state institutions reached only a small proportion of the population. Research mapped the actors on whom people relied for day-to-day dispute resolution, such as the police, courts, *kastom* authorities, churches, and informal leaders, and examined their relative legitimacy and effectiveness. This revealed the central role and uneven capacity of *kastom* systems in dispute resolution, alongside community demands for more responsive state services.

These insights guided the design of the Community Governance and Grievance Management (CGGM) project, which sought to strengthen relationships between communities, provincial government, and the police. Community Officers (COs), who were selected by communities but employed by provincial government, were introduced as locally grounded intermediaries able to manage minor disputes, refer serious cases to the police, and channel information and government services into hard-to-reach areas. The model remained flexible, adapting CO roles and titles to reflect different authority structures, conflict histories, and social dynamics across provinces.

By aligning interventions with local power dynamics, sources of legitimacy and the ongoing effects of conflict, the CGGM project helped rebuild trust in the police, reduce their burden of dealing with minor disputes, and improve communication between state institutions and communities. Provincial governments' long-term financing of CO salaries further reflects how politically attuned and conflict-sensitive design can support sustainability in SSGM initiatives.

In-depth analysis

Note that these processes generally take two to six months, depending on preparations, review processes, the methodology, and stakeholder engagement.

8. **Standard conflict assessment:** Identify the main drivers of conflict and risks of future conflict. Understand specific institutional or operational bottlenecks (for instance, fragmented accountability, weak inter-agency coordination, or political contestation around reform). Use iterative consultation to identify where collective action is possible, mapping incentives, trust levels, and institutional interdependencies. The process should build ownership, highlight alignment opportunities, and identify feasible short-term entry points for coordinated implementation. See this Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability (JACS) guidance note or this USAID violence and conflict assessment fact sheet.
9. **Country or sector-wide PEA:** Use this type of PEA to provide a broad overview of the country or sector and to describe the relevant political economy dynamics and how they manifest in the country or sector of interest. It is best aimed at individuals who are new to a

context, or to inform broad strategy and principles for engagement. See this USAID practice guide; this United States Institute of Peace example; or page 46 of this OECD DAC handbook which applies a PEA approach to SSGM.

10. **Problem-driven PEA:** Use this version of PEA to explore specific, critical problems (for example, case backlog, police corruption, delays in promotions). Analyse potential drivers, including interests, institutions (formal / informal rules), and structural factors, such as the nature of the state. Identify feasible entry points and coalition strategies. See this ODI toolkit, this World Bank practice framework, and this this World Bank report.

Table 1 summarises the broad uses for the tools sketched out above.

Table 1. Various SSGM Analyses and their Uses

Analysis / Purpose	Understanding the basics of an SSGM context or sector	Understanding drivers of conflict	Identifying specific SSGM problems	Analysing the drivers of a specific SSGM problem	Analysing support for an SSGM issue and stakeholder engagement plans	Adapting to opportunities in SSGM programmes
Rapid stakeholder and power mapping				✓	✓	
Quick PEA	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
ASCOPE/ PMESII	✓	✓	✓			
Human rights risk assessment	✓					
Problem tree			✓			
Ongoing political 'radar'		✓			✓	✓
SARA model				✓	✓	✓
Standard conflict assessment	✓	✓			✓	
Country or sector-wide analysis	✓	✓			✓	
Problem-driven PEA				✓		✓

Box 4: Using PEA for police support in Nepal

PEA can significantly strengthen SSGM by helping practitioners understand why security institutions behave as they do, where real authority sits, and which reforms are politically feasible. In Nepal, the experience of the former Department for International Development (DFID) (now the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO)) shows how early analytical work on police structures, budgeting systems, appointment politics, and district-level command dynamics provided a strong foundation for long-term programmes to support the police, with an emphasis on services supporting women and children. This understanding shaped priorities such as strengthening performance management, improving service units for women and children, and aligning community-level interventions with broader institutional reforms. Crucially, PEA helped link frontline realities with national-level incentives, enabling more realistic goal-setting and targeted engagement with ministries, police leadership, and local authorities.

Equally important was the way PEA became an ongoing practice rather than a one-off report. Sustained political engagement, long-term relationships, and continuity of analytical thinking by DFID/FCDO allowed the programme to refine its strategy, manage the risks, and seize opportunities. The Nepal case demonstrates that when PEA is embedded throughout the programme, SSGM reforms become more grounded, adaptive, and responsive to the political and institutional realities shaping the performance of the security sector.

5. Some keys to success

Experience with PEA, TWP, and conflict analysis offers some clear lessons for success that are essential to consider when completing the process.

When designing a process

- **Be clear about the purpose and the questions:** Clarifying the purpose and 'exam question' focuses a PEA or other analysis on exactly what needs to be understood to enable action, rather than producing broad background. It forces the team to specify the issue (for example, "Why does X happen?") and include a forward-looking element ("What is a realistic scenario for change?"), which disciplines scope and helps the findings to inform decisions. Without this framing, analysis may drift and is less likely to inform concrete choices.
- **Ensure that analysis is fit for purpose:** Choose the lightest product that credibly informs decisions. Analyses may be internal (for team strategy) or external (for counterpart buy-in); formal (polished note) or informal (slide deck, back-brief); discrete (one-off) or ongoing (living document).

Considerations of topics

- **Centre gender in all analysis:** Gender relations shape who holds power and access in real decision-making spaces. This means that ignoring gender relations blinds TWP to the actors, vetoes, and leverage that matter. Men, women, and gender-diverse people face different incentives, risks, and benefits from reforms; mapping these differences makes interventions feasible and safer. Centring gendered dynamics also expands coalitions (such as survivor groups or women's associations) and improves feedback loops, leading to faster learning and better course corrections.
- **Conflict sensitivity and human rights:** Success with SSGM programming requires avoiding unintended consequences in relation to conflict and human rights. This means integrating conflict sensitivity and human rights safeguards into every stage, including analytical inputs. Examples include focusing on systematic exclusion, which groups participate in security decisions, and a distributional analysis of potential effects of reforms by risk of abuse, among others.
- **Account for informal power structures:** Ignoring informal actors undermines key stakeholders in reforms. In SSGM, informal actors may include customary authorities, militias and informal justice providers.

In the analysis and recommendations

- **Appreciate strengths and build on positive outliers:** It is usually easy to identify problems, so seek out strengths on which programmes can build. Teams should also treat problems in an inquisitive (and not a judgemental) way.
- **Focus on action:** Avoid getting bogged down in analysis by asking, "So what?", and testing pathways of change that build on strengths. One helpful approach in SSGM is to take PEA insights on where power and influence lie, and how informal rules work among various actors,

and then develop annotated diagrams of who matters on key issues. For example, a formal accountability chain could be: police → oversight → courts → corrections, whereas the real one might be: police → political fixer → political party → oligarch. Working out who really calls the shots and holds people to account can make it far easier to develop a strategy.

- **Match recommendations to capability and resources:** Recommendations should relate to the actors who have to implement them. Particularly in lower-income countries, SSGM actors often have limited capacity and inadequate resources. Simple but effective actions should therefore be prioritised in these situations.
- **Build on solid evidence:** Ask, "How do we know this?" Use evidence as well as any available official records. Interviews should focus on the interviewees' direct experiences and seek to triangulate the information.

Methodology and dissemination

- **Keep to ethics guardrails:** Do no harm in interviews; protect identities; avoid fuelling factionalism; align with human rights due diligence. Fieldwork in volatile areas requires security protocols and trauma-informed interviewing.
- **Communicate clearly:** Think about the audience and how to communicate your findings. Avoid jargon that might alienate your audience. Visual representations can be useful; see this resource.
- **Use Artificial Intelligence (AI):** AI is an increasingly essential tool for conducting analysis, including (1) quickly gathering background information (watch out for sources, though); (2) advice on methodological approaches, exam questions, and survey or interview questions; (3) stakeholder mapping (subject to inputs); (4) writing reports, including developing and summarising interview and survey answers; and (5) general brainstorming, including with recommendations. It should be used with major caveats, however. The quality of outputs is heavily dependent on prompts. AI can make mistakes, so users always need to check results. Current AI models cannot replace the work of experts when there is a need for comprehensive or in-depth analysis. Ensure you are following your organisation's protocols for the use of AI and whether a specific AI tool (with appropriate privacy protocols) is required.

When to hire an outside expert

While the use of AI tools can go a long way in supporting efforts regarding PEA and TWP, where these are insufficient, the following are some reasons to contract outside help:

- **High-stakes sensitivity:** Human rights, vetting, or areas with conflict/ethnic dynamics where neutrality and specialist expertise are essential.
- **Credibility and access:** A respected former official or academic can unlock interviews, data, or cross-agency coordination that a donor team cannot.
- **Academic depth:** Digging into social science theory requires theoretical and methodological training.

- **Deep local knowledge:** Local experts help to capture and analyse critical political economy dynamics that are difficult for outsiders to detect.
- **Security and ethics:** Fieldwork in volatile areas requires professional safety protocols and trauma-informed interviewing.
- **Independence:** When findings must withstand parliamentary, media, or judicial scrutiny, external authorship and peer review add legitimacy. Even without this level of scrutiny, a programme may value the critical friend / challenge that an outsider offers to bring new perspectives and avoid groupthink.
- **Capacity surge:** Tight decision timelines (such as budget windows) can mean there is not sufficient in-house capacity for a rapid but credible analysis.

Appendix 1: List of SSGM topics within the PEA Framework

Foundations (structural context, legacies, settlements)

- **Macro trends and trajectories:** Context in which the programme operates; opportunities/risks; 'what might happen next?'
- **Conflict and history:** Fault lines; colonial/war legacies; disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) or peace agreements; state fragility.
- **Political settlement and elite bargains:** Who are 'winners and losers'; prevailing bargains that maintain stability; trade-offs among legitimacy/stability/interests.
- **Society and gender:** Cleavages shaping power distribution; experiences/expectations of security; inequities and mitigation; gendered impacts.
- **Economy and resources:** Economic base and its effect on security; natural resources/commercial infrastructure; corruption opportunities.
- **Security environment:** Drivers of insecurity; stability baseline; how interventions shift risks.
- **Geo/regional environment:** Colonial/Cold War legacies; bases/advisors; regional interference/cooperation; alliances/border management; donor landscape.
- **Media and information ecosystem:** Who controls the media; consumption/trust; supportive/dangerous narratives; channels and access; risks to monitor.
- **Technology and cyber landscape:** Partner/threat use of technology; emerging threats; data storage/flows; cyber resilience; information protection.
- **Environment and geography:** Climate/resource/geographic features affecting conflict/security; environmental impacts of interventions.

Rules and Norms (rules of the game, organisation, processes)

- **Laws, policies, and enforcement:** Formal frameworks governing the security sector; enforcement gaps and why.
- **Informal norms and customary practice:** Community experiences/expectations; informal rules in tension with or complementary to formal ones.
- **Security sector governance (SSG) architecture:** Democratic/civil accountability; oversight requirements; transparency mechanisms; avoiding elite capture.
- **Organisational capabilities and doctrine:** Past responses to instability/crime; structures, SOPs, training, doctrine; risks of off-label use of new capabilities.
- **Resourcing and sustainability:** How capability will be sustained; budget structures; procurement and anti-corruption transparency.
- **Management processes:** Power relations within the sector; human resources/postings; monitoring unintended consequences in fluid or hybrid contexts.

Actors (interests, power, coalitions)

- **Power, politics and agency:** Where power lies; rules maintaining the status quo; likely sponsors/blockers and why; how stakeholders may support/resist reform.
- **National state actors:** Head of state, interior/defence/justice; security chiefs; commissions; organisational power maps and relationships; informal objectives such as transformative vision, or desire to use patronage.
- **Non-state and hybrid actors:** Informal power structures; customary authorities; providers of protection/justice; informal networks and incentives; risks of empowering violent/criminal actors.
- **External actors:** Hostile states, opposition or criminal groups; their likely responses and mitigation; geopolitical/regional players with agendas; international donors and complementarities.
- **Oversight and civil society:** CSOs, media, ombudsmen or human-rights bodies; social divisions and coalition opportunities; existing relationships that programming can strengthen.
- **Champions and coalitions:** Immediate and future opportunities to reinforce positive change; high-leverage champions to back over the long term.

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