

## INTELLIGENCE IN PRACTICE

### PETER WILSON, INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY ADVISER, DEFENCE ADVISORY TEAM

*“Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”  
Leo Tolstoy, ‘Anna Karenina’.*

*“Three things are needed for government: weapons, food and trust. If a ruler can’t hold on to all three, he should give up the weapons first and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end: without trust we cannot stand.”  
Confucius.<sup>1</sup>*

#### Introduction

Dennis Thokozani Dlomo’s paper on the South African experience of intelligence reform gives an insider’s view of the radical changes that took place within South Africa in the post-apartheid era. The purpose of this introductory paper is to contrast Dlomo’s positive account of the reforms with some far less hopeful conclusions drawn by other authors, and to use this discrepancy to draw some general lessons for intelligence reform.

Management scientists often use the different but interlocking perspectives of organisational structure (how the organisation looks on paper), culture (how people behave) and power politics (where the power really lies) to understand an institution. Dlomo’s account uses a structural perspective to argue that the South African intelligence reforms have generally been successful. However other authors, using the different perspectives of culture and power politics, conclude that significant problems remain.

I argue that these differences are not unique to South Africa and can shed some light on the general process of intelligence reform. It is relatively easy to change organisational structures and the results are highly visible. Intelligence reform programmes have therefore tended to focus on this aspect. Changing cultures and power structures is much harder, less visible and longer term, and has proved more difficult for reform practitioners.

I then look at the different elements of intelligence reform, and discuss how culture and power politics matter more than the precise details of organisational structure. In particular, intelligence reforms are inextricably linked to wider security sector and political reforms. This does not however mean that a programme of intelligence reforms can only be attempted after other reforms are complete, and indeed intelligence reforms may be a useful first step that can underpin wider security sector and political reform.

Finally, I assess whether outside consultants can successfully navigate this political complexity or whether the field must be left to “local actors”.

As always when writing about security sector reform we should insert the caveat that no country’s experience will be wholly applicable elsewhere, and we argue in particular that intelligence reform is an unavoidably political process that needs to be carefully tailored to each country’s unique political situation. But we do hope to draw out some general principles that may be useful as a starting point when undertaking intelligence reform.

## **Differing views on South Africa's reforms**

Blomo paints a mostly positive picture of South African reform, and indeed from an organisational perspective the new structures seem to contain all the elements that security sector reform practitioners would wish for – a clear legislative framework, parliamentary oversight and central coordination of intelligence production and assessment.

However other authors using cultural and power politics perspectives to examine the reforms in practice have taken a far less positive view. In particular Kevin O'Brien wrote in 2003: "While the institutions of oversight and accountability of the intelligence function would appear to be strong on the surface, upon further examination these can be found to be weak and problematic at best... There has been – for one thing – a lack of trust inherent in the new dispensation: lack of trust between individuals (not just 'old guard' and 'new guard' but also between the various individuals affiliated with one liberation group or party who now find themselves working together); lack of trust in the institutions (serious concerns exist over the functions of the National Intelligence Agency); and lack of trust in the intelligence itself – deriving from both of the other two points and, perhaps worst of all, leading to (at times) a total politicisation of the process, with both the intelligence product becoming politicised and the political leadership developing parallel-but-independent intelligence structures due to their own professed lack-of-trust in the state structures. In all of these senses, South Africa is today – almost ten years into the post-apartheid era – faced with a continuing sense of fractiousness, factionalism, lack-of-trust and even corruption in its intelligence structures."<sup>2</sup>

In case this is seen as the cynical view of an outsider, we can turn to Laurie Nathan, who advised on the reform process in South Africa and has written frankly about the barriers to security sector reform<sup>3</sup>. In 2004, he wrote "The inexperience of parliamentary committees can lead to tension between parliamentarians and security officers. The officers might come to believe that the parliamentarians are ignorant and irresponsible, and the parliamentarians might feel that the officers are deliberately obfuscating matters in order to maintain the status quo. Adversarial relations between parliament and the security services impede the transformation process and can retard the democratic project." Nathan emphasises that much security sector reform depends on external liberal democratic structures and ways of working – such as a competent parliament and respect for the rule of law – which may not be present in many reform environments. He writes "Without the requisite institutional capacity, the values and principles of democracy cannot be 'operationalised' and insecurity might consequently remain pervasive. In these circumstances, it is not unlikely that the state and sectors of civil society will seek to fill the security vacuum in a militarist fashion." He argues that outsiders often attribute a lack of progress on reform to lack of political will amongst the executive and self-interested conservatism in the security and intelligence services, whereas in fact the problem is often one of capacity of the security institutions and their overseers. This conclusion is backed by a study of the related topic of police oversight by the South African Institute for Security Studies in December 2004, which concluded "...civilian oversight mechanisms have had, at best, mixed success and have made a limited contribution to police transformation... It is apparent that the capacity for policy analysis, monitoring and evaluation is severely lacking in some secretariats."<sup>4</sup>

These problems are not unique to South Africa. In another African country I was told that parliamentarians had refused to attend a reform briefing by the National Security Adviser unless they were paid to do so. The National Security Adviser genuinely wished to increase the democratic legitimacy of his sector by briefing outsiders but could not find anyone who was willing to listen. Elsewhere I have found parliamentary oversight committees with impeccably-drafted terms of reference which could never be truly effective because the members were drawn from an unrepresentative parliament stuffed with members of the ruling party.

In a post-conflict country I once found myself preaching the importance of delegation and trust to a Minister whose junior Minister had recently been assassinated and whose family and friends were being targeted for kidnap by groups connected to elements within the Government. In this environment it was unsurprising that the Minister turned to his own informal security networks based on long-standing tribal and family links rather than rely on a donor-imposed structure of committees staffed by people he did not know and could not automatically trust. One donor commented ruefully to me “the only things that work in this country have happened despite our involvement, not because of it”. He was left with the dilemma of whether to support the formal, accountable structures that the Government had allowed to exist in order to please the donors but which had been operationally sidelined, or to become involved in legitimising the unaccountable but operationally-effective personal networks that had sprung up in their place.

The common theme is that formal structures mean little if they are not trusted to be both honest and competent<sup>5</sup>. The philosopher Onora O’Neill<sup>6</sup> puts it as follows: “Elaborate measures to ensure that people keep agreements and do not betray trust must, in the end, be backed by – trust. At some point we just have to trust. There is no *complete* answer to the old question: ‘who will guard the guardians?’ On the contrary, trust is needed precisely because all guarantees are incomplete. Guarantees are useless unless they lead to a trusted source, and a regress of guarantees is no better for being longer unless it ends in a trusted source.”

Reform practitioners risk focussing on highly-visible but potentially cosmetic structural projects such as the creation of parliamentary oversight committees, rather than tackling the harder long-term work of increasing capacity and changing behaviour across the sector and in the wider political system. Intelligence reform risks being built on shaky foundations if it simply creates oversight sub-committees from bodies that are not yet competent and trusted, as seems to have been the case in South Africa.

### **The interlocking elements of intelligence reform**

Clearly organisational structures can influence culture and politics, and reorganisation of intelligence structures or creation of new bodies can be an important tool. But the important message is that reorganisation is only the start of the story, and there is a much longer and more difficult task of changing behaviour to be achieved before intelligence reform can be truly effective.

We discuss below the type of organisational, cultural and political changes that can be made in the intelligence sector and outline the important links between them.

Internal behaviour. The importance of competent and honest behaviour within an intelligence agency is often under-estimated by reform practitioners who concentrate more on external coordination and oversight. The keys to good internal management are that:

- Operational proposals are recorded clearly and subject to proper internal approval
- External clearance is sought where necessary
- An audit trail of approvals and operational expenditure exists for subsequent examination
- Operational meetings and resulting intelligence reports are recorded honestly and accurately

The management complexity of achieving these aims is often huge, particularly in an intelligence environment where the need for accountability has to be balanced with a legitimate need for operational secrecy and observance of the “need to know” principle. For example the British Secret Intelligence Service has a sophisticated system of record keeping and codewords that allows an external financial watchdog, the National Audit Office, to check the legitimacy of every operational

payment without learning the sensitive identities of recipients. Similarly a member of the judiciary, the Intelligence Services Commissioner, can demand to examine any operational file to check that the necessary internal and external clearances were secured. In both cases, the external overseers could not begin to do their job without a competent internal management system.

The principles of accurate record keeping are inherent in good operational practice as well as being a key enabler of external oversight. They can therefore be introduced into intelligence services under the heading of good management, without necessarily attaching the politically-charged and sometimes unpopular tag of “reform”.

It should go without saying that intelligence officers need to be honest servants of the nation as well as being competent. In my experience of successful intelligence services, the most powerful constraint on their behaviour is the internal public service ethos of the organisation, which builds up over time and draws on a wider cultural tradition of civil service impartiality and honesty. No amount of external oversight and checks and balances could compensate for an intelligence service determined to do wrong, and the building of an honest internal culture is the most pressing and difficult of the reformer’s tasks, particularly where the public service culture in wider society is weak.

External coordination The key conclusion of the various reports into the 9/11 attacks was a need for better coordination between the different US intelligence and security agencies, in order that disparate clues could have been connected and policy makers presented with a comprehensive view of the threat<sup>7</sup>. The problems of “stovepiping” and lack of coordination are common in many Governments and can lead to overly narrow views of threats and their consequences (for example in one African country I found one expert on the instability of neighbouring countries and another on the problems of refugee movements, but could find no one who was analysing the relationship between the two).

One important way of achieving coordination is to appoint a central authority to create common security standards across the security sector. Intelligence agencies are unlikely to present their reporting to other agencies if they believe that their reports will not be treated securely, and a central authority can do much to increase the level of trust between agencies by introducing and enforcing common standards and behaviour.

Some systems such as the UK’s Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) choose to formalise coordination by preparing joint assessments that draw on a full range of intelligence and overt reporting. Advocates of joint assessments believe that this offers policy makers a carefully-analysed and comprehensive view of the issues. In contrast, advocates of the US style of competing departmental assessments say that joint assessments tend to produce bland documents that underplay legitimate disagreement and impose a false consensus on complex and unclear issues.

Different systems will make different choices on the question of joint assessment, but what is important is that intelligence reports are not treated as uniquely truthful documents but weighed against all of the other evidence and judged on their individual merits. An intervening analytical function, independent of the intelligence producers, can give an objective view and provide an important counterweight to the understandable desire of intelligence officers to push their product to policy makers. In some services such as the CIA the analysts sit in the same organisation but are independent from the operational officers, in others such as the British system the analysts sit in a separate central body – the Assessments Staff which comes under the JIC. What is common is that there is an independent filter between the officer who writes the report and the ultimate intelligence customer, in order to maintain objectivity and common standards.

An external coordinator can impose not only the management discipline of common standards and improved coordination, but also the intellectual discipline of weighing intelligence against other evidence. It is often forgotten that analysts in the JIC or CIA are not “starting from zero” when assessing intelligence, but drawing on a wide range of external expertise from academics, the media and NGOs. Intelligence should rightly only be a small part of a puzzle that is mostly made up from overt material. One common problem in many developing countries is that there is a lack of security and foreign policy analysis in the wider academic and NGO community, often because the Government suppresses it. This is ultimately counter-productive, as the Government has little choice but to attach undue weight to intelligence reports that by their nature will often tend to be partial, ambiguous or even contradictory. In this environment, developing “security literacy” in the wider community can not only be a valuable end in itself, but can also ultimately strengthen the competence of the intelligence community as their assessments need to become ever more rigorous to complement the growing sophistication of open analysis.

The ability to soberly assess threats based on all the available evidence can have an important calming effect in volatile political environments. In one post-conflict African country a newly-formed National Security Council quickly established a reputation for investigating and analysing the myriad rumours of coup attempts that circulated rapidly in the capital city. Of course most of the rumours turned out to be completely unfounded, and their early exposure created a degree of stability which allowed the Government to focus on its more important tasks.

External oversight. The five main forms of oversight are executive, judicial, parliamentary, financial and ombudsman, and they all play an important inter-connecting role.

- Executive. Senior civil servants and Ministers can play an important role in ensuring that the risks of a proposed intelligence operation, particularly against a foreign Government, are outweighed by the benefits of the resulting intelligence. The need to clear risky operations with the executive is an important form of control and responsibility. It ensures that the risks of operations are properly taken into account and that the work of the intelligence agencies is on balance beneficial to the nation and consistent with overall foreign and security policy. Good intelligence agencies frequently welcome this constraint as it ensures that when operations go wrong, as they occasionally will, the executive were aware of the risks and were fully signed up to accept the consequences. It is strongly in an intelligence service’s interests that the executive realises that intelligence does not come for free, and therefore that intelligence is only demanded in the most important areas where the risks are considered acceptable. For the system to work the intelligence service must of course provide an honest and frank assessment of the risks when seeking approval. The second key element of executive control is budgetary – an intelligence service, just like any other Government department, should apply for funds to a Ministry of Finance or central coordinating body and should be able to justify its spending in terms of overall contribution to the national interest.
- Judicial. The most common form of judicial oversight is for a judge to issue warrants to allow activities such as telephone tapping and surveillance that would otherwise be illegal, and/or to retrospectively review operations to ensure that they were within the law. Typically the judge will be checking that the subject is an actual threat to national security rather than merely a political opponent of the current Government, and secondly that the intelligence services respect the idea of proportionality – that the level of intrusion into privacy was proportional to the threat.
- Parliamentary. In the British system the parliamentary oversight committee is not permitted to examine operational decisions or intelligence priorities, and is restricted to examining the

general working practices, policies and efficiency of the intelligence service. The US Congressional oversight system has far greater power, reflecting the greater separation of executive and legislature in the US. Different systems will make different decisions on the scope of parliamentary oversight, but one common theme is that a good intelligence service will welcome some degree of scrutiny in order to establish their democratic legitimacy. In many countries a common barrier to institutional continuity and competence development in the intelligence field is that intelligence officials all change when the Government changes. A smart intelligence director will seek to reassure opposition members, as potential future Ministers, that he is competently acting in the interests of the nation as a whole rather than the current Government.

- Financial. Whilst a parliamentary committee will wish to establish that the service as a whole is providing value for money in the national interest, a specialist audit body will wish to examine the details of payments to check that they are honest and properly authorised. As outlined above, this is a complex matter requiring a high standard of managerial record keeping and respect for operational secrecy within both the intelligence service and the audit body.
- Ombudsman. Some systems include an ombudsman or complaints commissioner, so that individuals can complain if they think they have wrongly been investigated by the security or intelligence services. Typically the ombudsman will simply report back on whether the complaint is upheld or not, rather than giving details. A complaint will not be upheld if there was in fact no investigation, or if there was an investigation but it was legal and properly approved.

As we have seen in South Africa, there may be a lack of competent and trusted individuals who can perform these oversight roles. The reform practitioner may simply need to work selectively with what is already present in the form of legitimate institutions or individuals, rather than attempt to put in place a comprehensive network of oversight mechanisms when the raw materials simply aren't available. In one Central American country a committee of NGOs was tasked with overseeing a national security agenda because the judiciary and parliament were not trusted to do so. Everyone acknowledged that this was an imperfect interim measure as the NGOs had no formal legitimacy compared to a properly-elected and competent parliament, but it was considered an important stepping stone in ensuring that the first attempts at oversight were successful and credible.

### **Replacing the “hidden wiring”**

The common theme in all of the above is the quest for intelligence to be a rational, well-managed, accountable process which acts in support of the national interest and independently of personal loyalties or party political ties. But we should note here that almost all successful politicians, in order to survive, will have their own existing “hidden wiring” of personal ties and loyalties through which they gather intelligence and exercise control. Such networks will often be extremely effective - when working to help set up a National Security Council Secretariat in one African country I was conscious that this small and inexperienced body would need a great deal of development before it could tell the President anything he didn't already know.

The replacement of “hidden wiring” with rationally-managed intelligence will be a long process. Political leaders may feel obliged to value the counsel of former colleagues from liberation movements or political struggles, even when those people are ill-equipped for the transition to running a Government. It may be difficult to trust people in the new dispensation who have been appointed on merit but whose loyalty is unknown. The short term attractions of personal networks

are therefore strong, but in the long term the dangers of relying on them are great. Networks of personal loyalties fray over time as the members die or become disillusioned, and the leader may be left with nothing to rely on. Closed groups become subject to “groupthink” and security myopia that causes them to hang on to declining threats and makes them blind to emerging ones. Most importantly, personal networks offer nothing in the form of capacity development, institution building or improved governance, and have to be replaced with new networks when the leader changes. Much of intelligence reform may therefore consist of laying down institutional foundations which struggle to gain influence in the short term, but in the long term will be turned to as personal networks fray or as new leaders come to power. In particular there may be great value in laying down legitimate institutions and liberal-democratic ways of working before a transition to democracy, in order to guard against the rise of a populist democracy which has majority support but few institutional checks or balances<sup>8</sup>.

Those SSR practitioners who baulk at dealing with intelligence services should acknowledge that the alternative to a well-managed intelligence service is not nothing at all, but instead a series of informal arrangements and personal networks. Such personal networks can be effective in the short term in maintaining stability and the leader’s control, but in the long term are unstable, unaccountable and an important contributor to conservatism in threat assessment.

### **The need to be holistic and the link to wider reforms**

It should be clear that the different elements of intelligence reform are intertwined, and in turn rely on much wider security sector and political reforms such as strengthening of parliament and the judiciary. Whilst the organisational details may change from place to place, the general principles of intelligence reform will be similar everywhere and will rely on a complex mix of a culture of public service, strong institutions, competent management and a high level of trust. Like Tolstoy’s happy families, “perfect” intelligence dispensations may all be alike and may not actually exist in practice. And like Tolstoy’s unhappy families, there are numerous different ways in which intelligence reform can fail, and as in South Africa a failure in one area can contaminate the whole.

I have pointed out where improved management and oversight can be operationally beneficial, and there need not always be a trade off between operational effectiveness and reform. It is good operational and management practice to accurately assess risks, to align operations with overall policy, to seek the support of politicians and civil society and to create institutional continuity despite political change. Thus the professional intelligence officer who seeks only to serve his nation need not have many fears from a competent reform programme. However one cannot escape the fact that intelligence reform may adjust the power balance in a country and will be unavoidably political. In particular the influence that intelligence services and central analysts have on threat assessments can lead to wholesale and perhaps unpopular changes in military and police dispositions. Control over threat assessments is an important lever of power; and bureaucratic influence, budgets and sometimes corrupt personal wealth can all depend on one’s ability to influence the perception of threat. The reformer has to understand all of these questions before s/he can make headway.

This understanding of the connections between different reforms, and the essentially political nature of the project, has been a common theme in most writing about all strands of security sector reform<sup>9</sup>, and there has been much emphasis on the need to make progress across a broad front. As a result, the word “holistic” has become something of a shibboleth in SSR circles. At first sight this seems uncontroversial and we might all agree that we would like to see all institutions, operational and oversight, operating as effectively and legitimately as possible. However in practice it is difficult or impossible to find examples of truly holistic SSR programmes, except where reform has been part of much wider political change (eg Eastern Europe) or where there has been an unusually

large scale external intervention (eg Sierra Leone). As we have seen in South Africa, there was a rush to create a range of new structures and oversight mechanisms which seemed to overwhelm the small existing base of competent and trusted institutions. Perhaps the desire for holistic reform is a counsel of perfection which is rarely possible in practice, and perhaps it acts as a bar to the sort of smaller scale focussed reforms that would be more achievable<sup>10</sup>.

The problem here is possibly confusion between means and ends. We all desire a holistic end point, but this might not mean that every reform programme has to be spread itself across all institutions that could possibly be defined as being within the security sector. There may also be a problem over timescales – if we expect that holistic reform takes 2-4 years than a reform programme must cover all the different fields simultaneously, whereas if our expectation of holistic reform is 10-20 years then it might make sense to concentrate on getting one narrow part of the programme right for the few first years. If we view our aim as changing the culture and power politics of the security sector rather than only the structures, then clearly the longer timescale is more realistic.

The idea that one could conduct SSR bit-by-bit is curiously taboo in SSR discussion, despite the fact that it is rapidly becoming accepted as best practice in change management circles<sup>11</sup>. Some SSR practitioners concede the need for “entry points” – an opportunistic seizure of a reform opportunity in one part of the sector in order to develop the trust to be allowed to conduct reform across the sector as a whole. But this is only part of the story. Even if one had complete authority across an entire sector, one might still choose to concentrate on getting a few small-scale but high-impact things right in the first few years. The classic account by management scientists Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne of change in the New York transit police force makes exactly this point – the commissioner Bill Bratton had total formal authority, but in an imperfect world of limited resources and limited management time he chose to focus on getting a few key “tipping points” right<sup>12</sup>. His ends were holistic but his means were selective.

### **Intelligence as one possible tipping point**

Intelligence services are sometimes grudgingly included in the SSR agenda, but most often because of the harm they could do if left out of the process rather than because anything positive is expected of them<sup>13</sup>. There has been much less emphasis on the positive contribution that intelligence reform can make to wider SSR, and I will argue that intelligence services in fact meet the two criteria for a “tipping point” – they offer a big reform impact in return for a relatively small input.

Contrary to the popular stereotype of the thuggish secret policeman, intelligence officers are often surprisingly reformist in outlook. In order to do their job they need a good understanding of, and perhaps empathy with, “the enemy”, and they are often well-informed about the actual threats that a country faces. Unlike the military they do not have large procurement budgets to justify by reference to sometimes imaginary threats. Perhaps most importantly, the intelligence services are almost always much smaller organisations than the police or military and it is therefore easier to reach every single member with information, training and other tools of reform. They therefore meet the first criterion of a “tipping point” – it takes fewer resources to work with an intelligence service than with military or police and they are often comparatively more open to change. The need to maintain secrecy certainly complicates matters but as outlined above is by no means a barrier to any form of oversight, and the manageable size of the service and relative sophistication of its officers tends to outweigh the difficulties caused by secrecy when considering the relative ease of reform.

In one African post-conflict country, the existing intelligence and security service was wholly replaced by a new organisation staffed entirely by well-qualified young people, most of whom were former schoolteachers or from similar professions. They were paid marginally more than other civil

servants in order to discourage yielding to the temptation of corruption, imbued with a proud ethos of public service by a charismatic and respected director who knew each of them personally, and posted to areas away from family and tribal ties in order to free them from undue personal influence in their work. Clearly such wholesale cultural and political change would have been far more difficult and expensive in larger services such as the police or military, and the country was able to quickly create an oasis of honesty and competence in what was a fairly rotten political culture.

The second criterion for a tipping point is impact. Would changing the behaviour of one intelligence officer have more or less impact than changing the behaviour of one soldier or police officer? The answer is mixed. In the short term, the average member of the public is likely to be far more concerned about abuses by police and military than by the activities of the relatively invisible intelligence services. So day-to-day impact at street level may be negligible. But it is intelligence services' political power, and in particular their ability to influence threat perceptions, that offer their key to reform. If an intelligence service and the related structures of intelligence assessment can offer a relatively objective view of the real threats to the nation, then they can provide the evidence to underpin the other elements of reform such as "right sizing" of the police and military. The author R. Jervis, in general no fan of intelligence, puts it as follows: "Intelligence may not be able to find the truth; even less may it be able to persuade others that it has found it. But keeping the players honest, not permitting disreputable arguments to thrive, pointing out where positions are internally contradictory or rest on tortured readings of the evidence would not be a minor feat. While it would not save the country from all folly, it would provide more assistance than we get from most instruments of policy"<sup>14</sup>.

Finally there is the demonstration effect. If a relatively elite and politically powerful body such as the intelligence service can be reformed, this creates a significant impetus for reform elsewhere. It can also create the means by which sensitive issues such as corruption and coup-plotting in other services can be dealt with carefully and rationally.

This is not to say that intelligence agencies everywhere hold the key to reform – I repeat that there are no absolute lessons anywhere in this. As always with intelligence matters the risks of operations must be judged against the benefits of the resulting intelligence, and one cannot say in theory what this balance will look like in specific countries. The culture of an intelligence agency may be so rotten, or the ability of civil society to control an intelligence agency so weak, that it is better to do without one altogether. But this need not always be the case, and the reluctance of SSR practitioners to deal with intelligence agencies may mean that they are missing out on a key reform opportunity.

### **The role of outsiders**

None of the above necessarily includes a role for outside consultants, and it should be clear that ultimately the success of reform depends on changing the behaviour of local practitioners and overseers rather than imposing externally-designed structures. Nevertheless, most SSR programmes tend to come with some degree of outside impetus, and we look now at the role of outsiders in intelligence reform.

I remember climbing off a plane in a highly-unstable African country with my trusty Powerpoint presentation in my hand, ready to lecture on Security Sector Reform. At my first meeting I was politely told by a senior military officer: "Your reform programmes are counter-productive. If you carry on supporting the police at the expense of the military, I cannot guarantee the loyalty of my junior officers."

This was one of those statements that was impossible for an outsider to assess. Was he telling the truth and issuing me with an important warning? Or lying, in order to secure more funds for his own unit? I was in no position to judge, but I was reminded of the extreme political sensitivity of SSR and of the dangers of getting it wrong.

Laurie Nathan<sup>15</sup> has argued that external actors can never know enough to navigate the political complexities of security sector reform and should therefore restrict themselves to facilitating the discussions of local actors. But he acknowledges that this may carry its own risks as even a perfectly-facilitated process may lead to outcomes which are counter-productive, undemocratic or inconsistent with fundamental human rights. Outsiders, particularly if they are supporting a reform process with development funds, can never escape the question “which local actors should we facilitate?” and cannot avoid taking a view on the policy conclusions of the reform process<sup>16</sup>. Nathan is absolutely right to say that any consultancy process needs to take account of the local context and achieve a high-level of local commitment if it is going to be sustainable, and he is right to counsel humility and caution to external actors who wish to become involved in complex local political processes that they don’t fully understand or who seek to unthinkingly impose their own blueprints. But we should nevertheless acknowledge that outsiders, if they are to be involved at all, cannot entirely escape the need to form judgements on the outcomes of the process that they are facilitating.

I would argue that external SSR practitioners could and should do a lot more than merely facilitate a local process, but only if they (we!) become a lot more competent than we are now. External SSR practitioners can play an important role as advocates and architects of reform, but only if we are willing to develop much greater local political knowledge and take the time to establish trusting long-term relationships with key local players. We should bear in mind that any experienced local official will have seen no shortage of outsiders preaching development ideas over the years, many of which have proved to be either useless or counter-productive<sup>17</sup>. A local official is being sensible, not obstructive, if s/he declines to accept a reform agenda or allow an outsider to intervene in the most sensitive areas of national security until s/he has fully tested the concept and its advocate. Outsiders need to respond to this understandable caution by using the diplomatic skills of analysis, advocacy, networking and long-term trust. They need to understand the culture and the power politics, and work closely with local actors who can manage the politics and the pace of reform. They need to analyse which elements of the “hidden wiring” they can work with and which elements their programme is designed to ultimately replace. Donors who see SSR simply as a technical or organisational issue will fail.

Donors and other reform practitioners are currently ill-equipped to rise to this challenge. Many practitioners rightly acknowledge the need for legitimate secrecy in intelligence services, but destroy trust by not having the systems nor the working practices to deliver confidentiality in the reform relationship. Budget cycles and personnel rotation mean that it is difficult to put in place long-term programmes and develop long-term relationships. Donors frequently try to force the pace of reform to fit their own programme-review schedules or bureaucratic politics, regardless of the local political imperatives.

The current trend in many Governmental donors to reduce management and transaction costs by outsourcing work to a series of self-contained programmes is likely to make matters worse. It will divorce SSR from the inescapable need to understand the political complexities and coordinate across programmes. Donors may find that the twin policy objectives of minimising management costs and achieving SSR are simply incompatible.

## **Conclusion**

It is probably too early to judge the success of the South African reforms. Kevin O'Brien<sup>18</sup> acknowledges that progress is being made on correcting the worst of the problems and that the new structures, whilst flawed, are still much better than in many other intelligence dispensations. It is clear that the organisational changes outlined by Dlomo have been implemented successfully, but unsurprisingly the cultural and power politics changes are taking much longer to materialise. We might only see the benefits of these reforms once a new breed of officers and overseers has grown up in the system and adopted its values, and it might take generational change for the formal structures not to be overwhelmed by the hidden wiring left over from the liberation movement.

Reorganisation is important and can influence the culture and the power politics of the sector, but it is never the whole story. Reform practitioners need to understand all three perspectives if they are to make progress on reform.

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, George Allen and Unwin, 1938, xii, 7, p.164, quoted in Onora O'Neill, *A Question of Trust*, Cambridge, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Kevin O'Brien, "Controlling the Hydra: An Historical Analysis of South African Intelligence Oversight", Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, September 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Laurie Nathan, "Obstacles to Security Sector Reform in New Democracies", *Journal of Security Sector Management*, Vol 2 No 3, September 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Duxita Mistry and Judy Klipin, "Keeping the Police in Check: Assessing the secretariats for safety and security", *SA Crime Quarterly* No 10, December 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Some authors distinguish between "confidence" in the ability of a person or institution to behave competently and "trust" in their willingness to behave honestly. We use the shorthand of "trust" to include both elements.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Report on 9/11 Attacks (note 90): "The United States has a long history of defining internal threats as either foreign or domestic and assigning responsibility to the intelligence and law enforcement agencies accordingly... The legal authorities, operational policies and cultures that had molded agencies like CIA, NSA and the FBI for years had not responded to the "globalization" of terrorism that culminated in the September 11 attacks in the United States. While some efforts, such as the creation of the CTC at CIA in 1986, were made to increase collaboration between these agencies, the agencies focused primarily on what remained essentially separate spheres of operations. In the absence of any collective national strategy, they retained significant autonomy in deciding how to attack and array their resources against Usama Bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida. Efforts to develop such a strategy might have exposed the significant counterterrorism gaps that existed between the agencies as well as the increasingly urgent need to compensate for those gaps in the absence of more fundamental changes in organization and legal authority."

<sup>8</sup> See eg Fareed Zakaria, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, November/ December 1997

<sup>9</sup> eg Nicole Ball, *Dilemmas of Security Sector Reform*, Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management; and Laurie Nathan, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> "While [SSR] may have grown in width it has not grown in depth... Lists of actual or possible activities falling under SSR have become long... often drawn up for development donor organisations by consultants with academic background. While recommendations are generally commensurate, there is little indication as to what to do first under particular circumstances. In fact, there is a general stress on the importance of comprehensive and consistent programmes, which obviously places a great burden on those actually planning SSR activities. There is little guidance on priorities for activities in much of the thinking on SSR so far". Michael Brzoska, *Development Donors and the Concept of Security Sector Reform*, DCAF Occasional Paper no. 4, November 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Eg "Real transformation takes time, and a renewal effort risks losing momentum if there are no short-term goals to meet and celebrate... Without short term wins, too many people give up or actively join the ranks of those people who have been resisting change." John Kotter, *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, *Harvard Business Review* March-April 1995.

---

<sup>12</sup> “Once people in an organization accept the need for change and more or less agree on what needs to be done, leaders are often faced with the stark reality of limited resources. Do they have the money for the necessary changes? Most reformist leaders do one of two things at this point. They trim their ambitions, dooming the company to mediocrity at best and demoralizing the workforce all over again, or they fight for more resources from their bankers and shareholders, a process that can take time and divert attention from the underlying problems. That trap is completely avoidable. Leaders like Bratton know how to reach the organization’s tipping point without extra resources. They can achieve a great deal with the resources they have. What they do is concentrate their resources on the places that are most in need of changes and that have the biggest possible payoffs.” W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne, *Tipping Point Leadership*, Harvard Business Review, April 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Eg “The role of intelligence services in the security sector should be recognised and addressed. Practically all governments find it necessary to maintain specialised forces in this area... Intelligence agencies should be included in security sector reform where their work is concerned with internal security threats. In this area, donors have been reluctant to contribute, as the need for transparency that pervades all other efforts in security sector reform is difficult to reconcile with the development of secret services. To counteract the obvious lack of transparency, the intelligence agencies must be subject to some form of civilian control. A complete detachment of such services from a general process of reform may easily undermine constructive development in other areas.” NUPI Working Group on Security Sector Reform, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> R. Jervis, ‘Strategic Intelligence and Effective Policy’ in A.S. Farson, D. Stafford and W.K. Wark (eds), ‘Security and Intelligence in a Changing World: New Perspectives for the 1990s’ (Cass, 1991) pp.179-80.

<sup>15</sup> Laurie Nathan, *Let Local Actors Take The Lead*, WSP International and The Peacebuilding Forum 2004, May 2004.

<sup>16</sup> At a seminar at which Nathan presented his paper on “local actor”, a well-respected head of an African NGO, commented “For God’s sake don’t leave it all to local actors. They’ll steal all your money and do nothing in return”. We were left with the Cretan paradox of being told to listen to a local actor who was telling us not to listen to local actors.

<sup>17</sup> See eg Irma Adelman, *Fallacies in Development Theory*, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of California at Berkeley, Working Paper 887, May 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*