

POLICY BRIEF



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Security Sector Corruption: The Overlooked Risk in Global Stability and Development Agendas

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Solidarity for the
Achievement
of the SDGs



Abstract

Good governance of the security sector is an essential foundation for sustainable development. The security sector, comprising actors responsible for security provision, management, and oversight, is fundamental in creating conditions for peace, justice, and strong institutions, aligning with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, Pact for the Future, and regional frameworks such as the African Union Agenda 2063. However, security institutions themselves are often vulnerable to corruption, exacerbating conflict and hindering sustainable peace and development.

Despite the G20's recognition of corruption's adverse effects on economic growth and governance, its Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG) has largely overlooked corruption within security institutions. Key risks include lack of transparency, weak oversight, procurement fraud, bribery, criminal infiltration, and abuse of power. These challenges are heightened by geopolitical shifts, rising global defence spending, climate-related security responses, and gender-specific vulnerabilities. Corruption in the security sector not only threatens national and international stability but also undermines global debt relief efforts by diverting public funds away from development and humanitarian needs, weakening their impact and hindering economic recovery.

To address these risks, the G20 and its members must reinforce oversight and strengthen integrity in the security sector in line with the Tshwane Principles, which balance national security with the public's right to information and responsible oversight. The G20 ACWG should launch a dedicated initiative to counter corruption in security institutions by leveraging best practices and developing high-level principles. This effort should include an analytical report on security sector oversight, a 'Model Act' for parliamentary oversight in collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and enhanced engagement with existing oversight platforms to strengthen anti-corruption measures.

Governments of the G20 should conduct corruption risk assessments in the security sector to identify vulnerabilities and institutionalise anti-corruption efforts. Enhancing oversight by legislative and independent bodies is also essential. Investing in parliamentary capacity and data-driven monitoring platforms will enhance transparency and accountability in defence and security spending, reducing corruption risks.

Keywords: Governance, Security Sector, Security Sector Governance, SSG, Security Sector Reform, SSR, Corruption, Anti-Corruption, Corruption Control, Integrity-Building

Diagnosis

Corruption in the Security Sector: A Barrier to Sustainable Development

Good governance of the security sector is an essential foundation for sustainable development.¹ Defined as the diverse set of actors responsible for the provision, management and oversight of security in a country,² the security sector creates the necessary conditions for peace, justice, and inclusive institutions, which are fundamental for advancing the 2030 Agenda³ and Pact for the Future,⁴ and supporting regional initiatives such as the African Union Agenda 2063 and the African Union Security Sector Reform Policy Framework.⁵ Yet, the very institutions entrusted with ensuring peace and stability are often the ones prone to corruption.⁶ Corruption, frequently defined as the abuse of public office for private gain,⁷ is especially damaging in the security sector where it weakens institutional effectiveness, fosters instability, and undermines the social contract

¹ DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, [Sustainable Development Goal 16: The importance of good security sector governance for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda](#). SSR Backgrounder Series (Geneva: DCAF, 2021); Oya Dursun-Özkanca, [The Nexus Between Security Sector Governance/Reform and Sustainable Development Goal-16: An Examination of Conceptual Linkages and Policy Recommendations](#) (London: Ubiquity Press, 2021); United Nations and World Bank, [Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict](#) (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018); Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, [The Roadmap for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies – A Call to Action to Change our World](#) (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2020).

² For a comprehensive definition see: DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, [The Security Sector](#). SSR Backgrounder Series (Geneva: DCAF, 2015), p.3.

³ On this aspect, in addition to the publications in note 1 above, see also: Franziska Ehler and Julian Klauke, [Linking security sector governance and reform to the SDGs: an analysis of Voluntary National Reviews \(2020–2023\)](#), (Geneva: DCAF, 2024); Alexandra Preperier, [Linking Security Sector Governance and Reform to the Sustainable Development Goals: An Analysis of Voluntary National Reviews \(2016–2019\)](#), (Geneva: DCAF, 2021).

⁴ United Nations, [Summit of the Future Outcome Documents, The Pact for the Future](#) (New York: United Nations, 2024).

⁵ Security Sector Governance and Reform directly contribute to aspirations 3 and 4 of the [African Union Agenda 2063](#) and is a vital element of the African Peace and Security Architecture and its [Security Sector Reform Policy Framework](#).

⁶ James Cohen, [Addressing Corruption Through Justice-Sensitive Security Sector Reform](#) (New York: International Center for Transitional Justice, 2017).

⁷ Upasana Garoo, [Corruption control and Integrity-building in law enforcement](#), Evidence-based learning series (Geneva: DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2025), p.9.

between governments and citizens.⁸ It has been well established “that corruption not only follows conflict but is also frequently one of its root causes.”⁹

Despite the G20's recognition of corruption's harmful impact on economic growth, sustainable development, investment, inequality, and public trust¹⁰ – as well as the 2025 South African Presidency's emphasis on public sector transparency and integrity for inclusive governance¹¹ – the risks of corruption within security sector institutions have only been addressed indirectly by the G20 through high-level initiatives that targeted corruption in customs,¹² emergencies,¹³ and organised crime,¹⁴ by endorsing high-level principles to guide these efforts. The Anti-Corruption Working Group-2025–2027 Action Plan also promotes best practices for cooperation among anti-corruption bodies, focusing on risks in public procurement.¹⁵ However, to ensure meaningful impact, these initiatives must be translated into concrete policy guidance and actions that explicitly address corruption risks within the security sector. Given the sector's vital role in upholding the rule of law and public trust, the lack of targeted action in the G20 Anti-Corruption Agenda is a critical gap. Without stronger transparency, accountability, and oversight, corruption will continue to undermine security sector governance, fuel conflict, and hinder sustainable peace and development.

⁸ The [United Nations Convention against Corruption](#) (UNCAC), the only legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument, recognizes in its preamble the problems and threats posed by corruption to the stability and security of societies and how it undermines the institutions and values of democracy and jeopardizes sustainable development.

⁹ Transparency International Defence & Security, “[Addressing the Nexus Between Corruption and Conflict Through Security Sector Reform](#)”, April 20, 2021. See also: Transparency International Defence & Security, [The Missing Element: Addressing Corruption through Security Sector Reform in West Africa](#), (London: Transparency International, 2020).

¹⁰ G20 Anti-Corruption Ministers Meeting, [Ministerial Communiqué](#), 22 October 2020, p.1; G20 Anti-Corruption Ministerial Meeting, [Ministerial Declaration](#), 24 October 2024, p.2. See also: UNODC, OECD, World Bank Group, [The Impact of Corruption on Sustainable Development](#), Think Piece for the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (2024).

¹¹ See on this the G20 South Africa 2025 [Sherpa Track Issue Note Anti-Corruption Working Group](#), January 2025.

¹² G20, [G20 High Level Principles on Countering Corruption in Customs](#), 2017.

¹³ G20, [G20 High-Level Principles on Preventing and Combating Corruption in Emergencies](#), 2021.

¹⁴ G20, [G20 High-Level Principles on Corruption related to Organized Crime](#), 2021.

¹⁵ G20, [Anti-Corruption Working Group 2025-2027 Action Plan](#), 2024.

Previous research has identified several key corruption risks in the security sector.¹⁶ A lack of transparency, coupled with weak external oversight, creates an environment where corruption can thrive – particularly through secret budgets and inadequate civilian monitoring whether by parliaments, independent oversight bodies, or civil society organisations. Procurement fraud and mismanagement risks are heightened in security environments where national security concerns limit competition and transparency.¹⁷ Bribery and extortion occur where security personnel demand bribes for safe passage, facilitate smuggling, or interfere with investigations. These practices can often be linked to criminal infiltration, collusion with organised crime, and illicit trade. Weak internal accountability mechanisms further enable corruption, making it difficult to hold offenders accountable and discouraging whistleblowing. Lastly, the abuse of power – whether to intimidate political opponents, suppress dissent, or favour loyalists over qualified professionals through unlawful hiring practices that often reinforce existing gender hierarchies and discriminatory practices to entry and advancement – undermines institutional integrity, weakens public trust, and erodes the effectiveness and legitimacy of security institutions.

Therefore, while the security sector presents a significant risk of corruption, it has yet to receive the attention it warrants from the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group. This brief contends that there are now stronger, more urgent reasons for the G20 to address this issue than ever, since its establishment in 1999. First, evolving geopolitical dynamics – driven by heightened international tensions, regional conflicts, and shifting security priorities – alongside rapidly rising international defence spending raise the risk of misappropriation, fraud, and other

¹⁶ On corruption in law enforcement agencies see: Upasana Garoo, [Corruption control and Integrity-building in law enforcement](#), Evidence-based learning series (Geneva: DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2025); Pierre Aepli, [Toolkit on Police Integrity](#) (Geneva: DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2019). On corruption in the defence sector see resources by Transparency International Defence & Security including the [Government Defence Integrity \(GDI\) Index 2020](#) and its [forthcoming 2025](#) iteration.

¹⁷ The potential scale of the problem is evident when looking at the revenues from sales of arms and military services by the 100 largest companies in the defence industry that reached \$632 billion in 2023 (SIPRI, [World's top arms producers see revenues rise on the back of wars and regional tensions](#), 2 December 2024).

forms of corruption related to procurement, contracting, and arms deals.¹⁸ The risk is exacerbated by several ongoing conflicts around the world. Second, the climate crisis and the growing need to respond to “extreme weather events”¹⁹ can act as a “threat multiplier,” worsening existing vulnerabilities and contributing to instability, particularly in fragile states.²⁰ Indeed, the increasing security sector involvement in climate-related issues can create opportunities for corruption as the influx of emergency funds and the urgency of response efforts often lead to reduced oversight.²¹ It is therefore very important that when the security sector is involved in climate crisis responses, strong oversight and anti-corruption measures are in place. Corrupt security providers are less effective in responding to traditional and non-traditional threats, disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable. Third, while global initiatives for debt relief are gaining momentum, their effectiveness may be compromised by corruption in the security sector. Indeed, when security institutions divert public funds through corrupt practices, resources meant for development and humanitarian efforts are misallocated, weakening the intended impact of debt relief and undermining efforts to promote economic stability and recovery.²² Moreover, donors and lenders such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank often condition debt relief on the implementation of governance reforms. When the security sector is a significant source of financial leakages or fund mismanagement, it can undermine confidence in broader fiscal reform efforts. This, in turn, may negatively affect the prospects for global debt relief.

¹⁸ Transparency International, [Trojan Horse Tactics: Unmasking the Imperative for Transparency in Military Spending](#) (London: Transparency International 2024); Nan Tian, “Global Developments in Military Expenditures, 2023”, [Sipri Yearbook 2024](#) (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024); Pieter D. Wezeman, Lucie Béraud-Sudreau and Siemon T. Wezeman, [Transparency in Arms Procurement: Limitations and Opportunities for Assessing Global Armament Developments](#) (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020).

¹⁹ G20 Anti-Corruption Ministerial Meeting, [Ministerial Declaration](#), 24 October 2024, p.3.

²⁰ DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, [Climate Change and Security Sector Governance and Reform](#), SSR Backgrounder Series (Geneva: DCAF, 2023); Maria-Gabriela Manea, [The Security Sector and Climate Change](#), Geneva Global Policy Briefs N.2/2021.

²¹ Lindy Heineken and Christian Leuprecht, [Military Operations in Response to Domestic Emergencies and Global Pandemics](#) (Springer Cham, forthcoming 2025).

²² See for instance: Bretton Woods Project, [The polycrisis: How unchecked public debt fuels corruption and bad governance](#), 18 April 2024.

Fourth, corruption in the security sector has distinct gender dimensions and gendered impacts, often exacerbating existing inequalities and creating specific vulnerabilities. Existing research underscores its particular relevance in fragile and post-conflict States with weak governments and absence of the rule of law, where corruption can fuel gross abuses of human rights including sexual violence and forced displacement.²³

Previous research revealed significant variations in corruption risks within the security sector across G20 members, ranging from low to critical.²⁴ The disparity presents an opportunity for knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices to strengthen anti-corruption efforts. Now is the critical moment to initiate a dialogue on mitigating corruption risks within the security sector and the role that good governance of the security sector can play. Addressing these risks holds the dual benefit of maintaining the social contract and trust between the government and the people, ensuring long-term stability and sustainable development.²⁵

Recommendations

Considering the above, the G20 and its members should prioritise efforts towards corruption control and integrity building in the security sector. Addressing corruption risks and promoting integrity within security institutions is vital to fostering sustainable development, peace and stability through good governance at a time when the security sector has become increasingly vulnerable.

To achieve this, developing robust oversight mechanisms is essential, as their absence has been a major contributor to corruption risks in the sector.²⁶

²³ Sabrina White, [Corruption, The Defence and Security Sector, and Sexual And Gender Based Violence](#) (London: Transparency International, 2024).

²⁴ See Transparency International [Government Defence Integrity \(GDI\) Index 2020](#) and its [forthcoming 2025](#) iteration and Transparency International, [Watchdogs? The quality of legislative oversight of defence in 82 countries](#) (London: Transparency International, 2013).

²⁵ Upasana Garoo, *Corruption Control and Integrity Building in Law Enforcement*, p. 9.

²⁶ Dan Kuwali, ["Oversight and Accountability in Security Sector Governance"](#), Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 11 September 2023.

Strengthening the role of parliaments, independent oversight bodies, and civil society is crucial to ensuring transparency and accountability of security institutions.²⁷ This includes empowering parliamentary security sector committees with access to classified information and adequate technical expertise, establishing and capacitating independent audit institutions with a mandate to review defence spending, and creating accessible complaint and whistleblower mechanisms for personnel and civilians. Civil society organisations should also be enabled to monitor procurement processes and advocate for open budgeting and reporting practices. These mechanisms must be adapted to the security context—ensuring they do not compromise national security and operational sensitivity while still upholding transparency and accountability standards in line with the *Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information*, a set of international guidelines that helps governments uphold national security interests while enabling responsible public oversight.²⁸

Against this background, these policy recommendations target the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group and the governments of the G20.

1. To the G20 Anti-Corruption Working Group (ACWG): Launch a New Initiative on Countering Corruption in the Security Sector

- **Leverage Best Practices to Inform G20 Anti-Corruption Principles.** Start by preparing an analytical report on best practices and lessons learned in

²⁷ Wilhelm Janse van Rensburg, Nicolette van Zyl-Gous, and Lindy Heinecken, [Parliaments' Contributions to Security Sector Governance/Reform and the Sustainable Development Goals: Testing Parliaments' Resolve in Security Sector Governance During Covid-19](#) (London: Ubiquity Press, 2022); Luka Glušac, [Leaving No One Behind, Leaving No One Unaccountable: Ombuds Institutions, Good \(Security Sector\) Governance and Sustainable Development Goal 16](#) (London: Ubiquity Press, 2023); Alice Alunni and Richard Steyne, [The Contribution of Ombuds Institutes to Sustainable Development Goal 16 Through Security Sector Governance and Reform: A Selection of Case Studies](#) (Geneva: DCAF, 2024); Merle Jasper, [The Contribution of Parliaments to Sustainable Development Goal 16 Through Security Sector Governance And Reform](#) (Geneva: DCAF, 2021); DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, [The contribution of civil society to SDG 16 through security sector governance and reform](#) (Geneva: DCAF, 2024); Aries A. Arugay and Justin Keith A. Baquisal, [Accountability, discourse, and service provision: Civil Society's Roles in SSG/R and SDG 16](#) (London: Ubiquity Press, 2024).

²⁸ Open Society Foundation, [The Global Principles on National Security and the Right to Information \(The Tshwane Principles\)](#), Justice Initiative, 12 June 2013.

overseeing security institutions in the fight against corruption, drawing from case studies and experiences of G20 countries – with particular attention to gender-disaggregated data and gender-specific impacts. The compendium produced by DCAF, Transparency International UK, and the NATO PfP serves as a valuable reference, offering key concepts and practical tools to promote good practices in defence management and policy through a focus on integrity building.²⁹ The report should be considered at the next G20 to inform High Level Principles on Countering Corruption in the Security Sector.

- **Develop a “Model Act” for Parliamentary Oversight of the Security Sector.**

In collaboration with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the P20, the Pan-African Parliament, and the T20, the ACWG should develop a “Model Act” on parliamentary oversight of the security sector to strengthen G20 members' legal frameworks to mitigate corruption risks in the security sector.³⁰ This should be accompanied by the provision of technical training for parliamentarians on budgetary oversight of security institutions and a practical toolkit for governments on anti-corruption efforts and integrity in the security sector, including aspects of ethics, conduct, and disciplinary measures for security sector officials.³¹

- **Enhance Oversight Collaboration for Effective Anti-Corruption Efforts.**

Throughout 2025 and beyond, the ACWG should leverage the role of and synergies between the G20 and independent oversight bodies and platforms (eg, International Conference of the Armed Forces hosted this year by the South African Ombuds in Pretoria) to explore policies and practices on how oversight actors such as ombuds institutions can contribute to efforts to promote public sector transparency, integrity, and

²⁹ Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, [Building Integrity and Reducing Corruption in Defence: A Compendium of Best Practices](#) (Geneva: DCAF, 2010).

³⁰ See as an example the [Model Act for the Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance | Inter-Parliamentary Union](#), developed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

³¹ See Pierre Aepli, [Toolkit on Police Integrity](#) (Geneva: DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2019).

accountability with a focus on security institutions, in line with the G20 ACWG 2025-2027 Action Plan.

2. To the Governments of the G20: Assess Corruption Risks in the Security Sector and Strengthen Oversight

- **Assess Corruption Risks for Effective Reform.** Complete a self-assessment of corruption risks in the security sector to identify organisational vulnerabilities, priorities and sequencing of interventions to mitigate risks for long-term impact.³² For this purpose, the International Organisation for Standardisation ISO 31000 guide for risk assessment and management,³³ the UNODC *State of Integrity* guide³⁴, and DCAF's Police Integrity Building Programme and Training Manual,³⁵ offer practical frameworks for assessing corruption risks and building integrity in public security institutions. These outline methods to identify and address specific vulnerabilities while also providing guidance on embedding anti-corruption and integrity-building measures into an organisation's daily operations to ensure long-term integrity and accountability.
- **Strengthen Legislative Oversight and Transparency in Security Spending.** Allocate resources and invest in capacity building for legislatures to scrutinise, legislate and debate defence matters, including secret defence budgets and intelligence services. Consider investing in data-driven monitoring platforms to strengthen parliamentary oversight of defence and security spending to ensure that it serves its intended purpose rather than fuelling inefficiency and corruption. The World Bank

³² Upasana Garoo, *Corruption Control and Integrity Building in Law Enforcement*, p. 21-22.

³³ International Organization for Standardization, [Risk Management - Guidelines for the Implementation of ISO 31000](#) (Geneva: International Organization for Standardization, 2018).

³⁴ UNODC, [State of Integrity – A Guide on Conducting Corruption Risk Assessments in Public Organisations](#), (Vienna: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020).

³⁵ DCAF, [Police Integrity Building Programme](#), (Geneva: DCAF, 2015).

Group, for instance, has developed a guiding framework for leveraging Procurement Data Analytics to generate insights and evidence that enhance the monitoring of procurement outcomes. This framework aims to support policy discussions, drive reform initiatives, and evaluate the effectiveness of procurement strategies. By applying data-driven approaches, the framework seeks to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability in public procurement. Its overarching goal is to maximise savings, uphold integrity, promote economic growth, foster inclusiveness, and ensure the long-term sustainability of public procurement spending.³⁶

Conclusion

Corruption in the security sector poses a critical challenge to sustainable development, democratic governance, and global peace. As global threats evolve and defence spending rises, the urgency of addressing this long-standing blind spot within the G20 Anti-Corruption Agenda has never been greater. The security sector's unique vulnerabilities – from procurement practices to limited oversight – require tailored anti-corruption measures that reflect the sector's sensitivity while upholding democratic accountability and public trust. Ignoring these risks not only undermines development goals but also perpetuates cycles of conflict, instability, and inequality, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

The G20, as a global agenda-setter, is uniquely positioned to lead a paradigm shift in how corruption in the security sector is addressed. By initiating targeted actions – anchored in the Tshwane Principles and informed by best practices across its diverse membership – the G20 can catalyse meaningful reforms. Investing in transparency, strengthening independent oversight, and embedding

³⁶ World Bank, [Using Data Analytics in Public Procurement Operational Options and a Guiding Framework](#) (Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 2022).

integrity within security institutions are not only essential for curbing corruption but also for restoring public trust and reinforcing the foundations of peace and development. Now is the moment for the G20 to fill this policy gap and demonstrate leadership where it matters most.

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