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The Role of Private Security Firms in Guaranteeing Security on the African Continent

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Summary

Many African countries recently witnessed an increase in both the number of private security firms and the number of personnel employed as private security officers. This development coincides with a moment in global history in which the entire world is 'fractured' due to multiple emerging and persisting threats to human security. In Africa, where most of the security threats are man-made, private security firms through the range of services they provide contribute to improving the security of lives and property on the continent. This policy brief critically analysed the role of private security firms in guaranteeing security in the face of new and persisting security challenges on the continent. It raised critical questions regarding the impacts and interactions of these firms with state security agencies and the extent to which they ameliorate or worsen social inequalities as well as concerning effective regulation of their activities in Africa. Policy recommendations are made to address the issues.

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Introduction

Private security firms (henceforth, PSFs) are increasingly involved with policing African societies. They perform this role through the range of services they offer. These include guard and patrol, security consultancy and training, investigation, information security and armoured car services. In the face of emerging security challenges such as terrorism, kidnapping and cybercrimes, as well as persisting conventional crimes such as robbery and embezzlement, PSFs' services are increasingly being patronized by a growing number of clients. In particular, rich individuals, organisations and governments now rely on PSFs for protection and security of their persons, customers and property. In performing their roles, PSFs tend to focus on promoting the mandates of their clients. They are also good at adopting preventive and future-oriented approaches rather than reactionary ways of policing.

Not surprisingly, many African countries recently experienced significant growth of PSFs. South Africa, for example, is one of the largest private security markets in the world measured as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). In many other African countries such as Nigeria, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Kenya, PSFs are a ubiquitous feature of urban environments.

Although, multiple factors contributed to the growth of PSFs, two in particular, are most significant in the African

context. The first is a real or perceived increase in criminal violence and insecurity along with the public's fear of crime. The public's fear of crime is magnified by what is perceived to be 'new' criminal threats on the African continent, such as information age crime (cyber and high technology crime), transnational organized criminal activities, human trafficking, kidnapping, and an upsurge of terrorism and insurgency. These threats together with those associated with drug trafficking, money laundering, currency counterfeiting, maritime piracy and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) have led to increased fear of crime and insecurity in many African cities. This is further exacerbated by persistent sources of insecurity such as extreme inequality, massive poverty and rising unemployment. It has raised a demand for crime prevention and control to a 'stage of emergency'. What we now see is a growing need for assurance of security not only among affluent individuals, organisations and the government but also, and even more desperately, among ordinary citizens across the African landscape.

The second major force associated with the growth of PSFs in Africa is changing economic and social structures. A major aspect of this change involves the expansion of free enterprise economic systems internationally. This has led to a growing inequality among the few rich and the majority poor in many African countries. As rich individuals and

corporate organisations increasingly own 'mass private property' that are open and accessible to the general public, the responsibility of owners to secure their property and customers has increased in an environment of legal liability. Thus, the growth of PSFs' is a response to the social system's need for additional protective measures for private interests. PSFs provide an additional general level of protection to their clients in many African communities.

Although there is a growing recognition that the private security industry in Africa recently experienced rapid growth and that PSFs have great potential to improve security on the African continent, the specific role of PSFs in guaranteeing security in the face of new and persistent security challenges is not well articulated. This policy brief addresses this concern. In so doing, it raises critical questions regarding the interaction of PSFs with and impact on state security forces (SSF), the extent to which they ameliorate or worsen inequality and the regulation of PSFs' activities in Africa.

The Role of Private Security Firms in Guaranteeing Security

PSFs complement the public security forces in policing society through the range of services they offer. Their role in this regard is even more crucial in the face of the alarming dimension

that insecurity has now assumed. To understand this role, it is important to highlight the range of services that PSFs provide. These include security guards and patrol, alarm systems, investigative services, armoured car services, and security consultancy and training. There is also a miscellaneous category that includes guard dogs, drug testing, forensic analysis, and honesty testing. In some climes, PSFs are also involved with correctional facilities' management, system integration and management, pre-employment screening and information technology (IT) security.

Despite these diverse services, PSFs are often conceptualized narrowly in terms of the roles played by private security officers on patrol. These roles include their traditional function of observing and reporting potential security threats and actual crimes, namely the maintenance of order and law enforcement function. However, it is important to note that guard and patrol is only one component of private security function and it covers all guard and patrol services including bodyguard/close protection, witness protection, crowd control and foot/vehicle patrols in public spaces.

Beyond guard and patrol, PSFs also contribute to security of persons and property in their roles as, security consultants and as providers of alarm system services, investigative services, and forensic analysis. Each of these components of private security

function also includes diverse kinds of services. Security consultancy, for example, may include designing systems and developing specifications for technological and physical measures. It may also entail conducting security training; counter measures for industrial espionage; and administering polygraph and psychological stress evaluations. Security consultancy also has to do with providing expert advice on loss prevention and risk management. All these are essential for the safety and security of persons and property. The overall idea behind security consultancy is to create built environments, policies and operational procedures that enhance human safety and security, while preventing future crimes.

In the same way, alarm systems component of private security function includes alarm installation and repair, alarm monitoring services, and alarm response services. The investigative component of private security function includes the conduct of various forms of confidential investigations and surveillance as well as the collection and dissemination of intelligence that will aid in the tracking and recovering of stolen assets as well as assessing and managing incidents of targeted violence.

What all these mean is that PSFs can no longer be conceptualized in the traditional sense as primarily providing watchmen and guards for access control, even though many firms, particularly in Africa, still perform this role frequently. Instead, their role has expanded

beyond our traditional understanding. The specialized and diverse nature of private security services qualifies them as equal partners with the police and other state security forces in preventing, detecting and responding to new forms of crimes. The preventive mentality that PSFs frequently employ in the discharge of their role and the future-oriented nature of their policing particularly through surveillance is what African societies require to tackle emerging security problems.

From their traditional function of guarding and patrolling, PSFs, by their very presence, provide deterrence to some forms of crime and victimization. They provide an added level of both formal and informal surveillance of private and public spaces, enabling personnel to alert public police and other emergency responders to events that negatively impact public safety and security. Private security guards are used in a variety of sectors such as critical infrastructure, commercial, institutional and residential. They are used to protect people and property and have increasingly been used in advanced societies to support law enforcement and emergency personnel as well as to protect military bases throughout the world.

As the South African situation suggests, PSFs provide valuable assistance to the police in guarding buildings and shopping malls, transporting prisoners to court, responding to house alarms and in sharing information and technical

advice concerning modern security gadgets such as closed circuit television (CCTV). In this way, PSFs relieve the police of some of their responsibilities allowing them to concentrate on their top priorities of murder, rape and armed robbery cases which will go a long way in improving general level of security.

Through their investigative services, PSFs are valuable to corporations or organisations in handling the investigation of criminal cases such as insurance and credit card fraud, internal theft, and in some cases corporate intelligence and industrial espionage. As investigators, PSFs have the potential to quickly enquire into past events with a focus on perpetrator identification and future event prevention. Additionally, their alarm systems are useful in detecting intrusion as well as explosive devices. They transmit signals at the premises or remote location, thereby helping in preventing the adverse consequences of certain terrorist activities.

PSFs are also valuable in safeguarding against loss arising from breach of information security including unauthorized access, modification, destruction, or disclosure of the information whether accidentally or intentionally. They can ensure that organisations' security systems are properly maintained.

From the foregoing analysis, PSFs play a crucial role in guaranteeing security on the African continent if their potentials are properly harnessed. To fully benefit

from the role of PSFs certain identifiable policy issues regarding their operations must be addressed. These include the needs to boost cooperation between PSFs and state security forces (SSFs), reduce inequality of access to services of PSFs and the need for effective regulation of PSFs' activities on the African continent. These critical issues are elaborated on in the following sections.

Critical Issues

Interaction with and Impact of Private Security Firms on State Security Forces

From the functionalist perspective, PSFs and state security forces (SSFs), particularly the police, share the same mission in protecting people and property through crime prevention, detection and response (though private police appear to be more preventative and future oriented than the public police who is largely reactionary). As such, they are expected to interdepend on each other and cooperate to tackle the growing insecurity in African communities. Not surprisingly, in some African countries such as South Africa, PSFs are increasingly interpenetrating and overlapping with SSFs not just in interagency recruitment but also in terms of exchange of information about crime patterns, policing techniques and anti-crime technology.

Despite the benefits derivable from this partnership, the overall picture of PSFs' interaction and impact on SSFs

in Africa is not very impressive. This is partly due to the influence of the state-centric perception of policing as the exclusive preserve of the public police and the tendency to see private police as acting for private interests that were often at odds with public interests. Instances abound from the experience of operators of PSFs in which the police or other public security agency acted in an unfriendly manner towards their company. Such behaviour ranged from showing sheer disregard to private security guards or a police man assaulting a private security guard, to verbal abuse and distrust of private security guards, especially when there is a crime case in the premises where the guards operate. As a result, some private security practitioners tend to feel the SSFs do not care about private security until they are considering a job in that field especially after they have retired from public service. Others perceive the police as elitists.

PSFs on their part have also exhibited uncooperative attitudes towards SSFs particularly the police by refusing to report crimes to them. As a result, the latter tend to be sceptical about PSFs' competency largely due to the paucity of pre-employment screening, training, standards, certification and regulation of security officers within the private security industry. Some police also tend to see private security as a threat to their domain partly because police generally have little understanding of the broad range of private security functions, capabilities, expertise, and resources and therefore fail

to appreciate the role of private security.

Nevertheless, as the private security field grows, its interaction with and impact on public law enforcement would continue to evolve. At the moment, it is common to find many retired state security officials holding positions in private security while some serving state security officials tend to work as private security officers in their off-hours. On the other hand, PSFs are increasingly collaborating with SSFs for training of their officers. Some are also making use of SSFs in the protection of critical facilities particularly in countries such as Nigeria where the private guards' company policy prevents PSFs from carrying arms. Thus, what we are witnessing now is a shift in focus from an analysis of competition between the sectors to the recognition that each form of policing can help the other.

Private Security Firms and Social Inequality

PSFs through the range of services they provide may improve the security of rich individuals, corporate organisations and government institutions, but they also exacerbate inequality of accesses to security across the African landscape. To a significant degree, crime and insecurity follow the lines of wealth such that, the poorer one is, the more likely he/she is to suffer from both fear of crime and actual crimes. As the wealthy barricade themselves behind higher security walls and advanced alarm systems, crime moves to the poorer neighbourhoods

where the 'spoils' may be less enriching, but more accessible.

By customizing their services towards meeting the demands of their clients – the rich, PSFs effectively enhanced the security of an advantage class to the neglect of the 'have-nots'. In this way, PSFs are worsening inequality of access to security by touring along the path of the public police in Africa where nearly half of the police are in private hands. Thus, to the extent that PSFs do not deliver security as a public good and service; nor are their services consumed as such, they exacerbate inequality of access to security for citizens from low income background.

Ineffective Regulation of Private Security Firms

Regulation of PSFs entails establishing conduct norms and securing mechanisms to maintain acceptable behaviour within those established norms. The regulation of economic matters such as the terms of entry into the private security industry often mark the initial step. This involves managing the cost of registration and licensing, and competition in the market for private security. It then focuses on improving the quality of services offered; controlling the prices charged; protecting employees against discrimination, poor working conditions, and dangers in the work place; ensuring respect of citizens' fundamental rights while policing; and preventing the private security guards or the firms

they work for from engaging in criminal behaviours. In other word, regulating PSFs entails constraining the destructive effects of the private security market through surveillance, that is gathering information as well as monitoring and supervising their activities to ensure honesty, accountability and efficiency.

Although regulation could be initiated by the PSFs themselves through industry self-regulation or end-user/client industry standards, and the involvement of non-governmental organisations, these key actors have not been very involved with regulation of PSFs in Africa as much as the state regulatory authorities. The state has been at the forefront of setting industry standards for PSFs by specifying prohibiting activities, offenses and penalties as well as establishing the regulatory authority for them.

Despite the availability of institutional mechanisms for regulating PSFs in Africa, particularly at the national level, the private security industry is still characterized by the following challenges:

- Absence of universally accepted standards for PSFs that must be observed by all particularly regarding how best to shape and guide their role in crime prevention, detection and community safety.
- High cost of licensing/undue emphasis on licensing of the firm which engages in the private security business at the expense of

licensing the private security guards whose conducts have implications for human security.

- Lack of specialty classification of PSFs to foster specialization of roles and division of labour among them as exemplified by the Nigerian reality where individual PSFs appear to be 'jack of all trade and master of none'.
- Lack of clear division of authority between PSFs and SSFs in situations where the two forces are involved in a joint mission or where PSFs make use of state security forces.
- Inadequate monitoring and control of operations of hidden sectors of the private security industry. Many PSFs still operate without licenses and are frequently involved in undercutting competitors' bids in order to win contracts, thereby lowering standards in the industry.
- Poor wages of private security guards and associated low quality service and standards in large parts of the sector.
- Potential and actual criminal abuses arising from the activities of private security guards such as requesting bribes before performing their primary duties or stealing from clients.
- Contradictions between principles and practice of PSFs such as the operation of foreign PSFs in Nigeria

and the use of firearms by some in violation of the Private Guard Company Act 1986.

- Lack of cohesion among individual PSFs which has led to 'intra-systemic competition as well as internal wrangling among various professional associations. This is particularly concerning because it has resulted in a failure to achieve uniform standards in the private security industry. In particular, there is a lack of uniform standards in key areas such as, adequate background checks on applicants, general requirements for qualification for employment in the industry, training, salaries and working conditions, as well as fixing of fees for PSFs services and products.

All these challenges suggest the urgent need to employ a problem-oriented policing that involves multi-agency attempts to regulate PSFs. This notion of regulation departs from traditional sovereign notions of command to focus on a process of coordination, steering, influencing and balancing the interaction of public and private policing agencies. Effective regulation of PSFs in Africa would require the collaboration and cooperation of state and all stakeholders in the industry including PSF operators and their clients.

Recommendations

To address the critical issues analysed above, the following actions are recommended:

1. Provide Uniform Standards for PSFs Operating in Africa: African states through the African Union and the Regional Economic Communities in consultation with relevant stakeholders in the private security industry should create a uniform set of standards acceptable to all countries that must be observed by all PSFs in their role as private guarantors of security on the African continent.
2. Strengthen Self-Industry Regulation and End-User/Clients Industry Standards: PSFs operating in Africa and their clients should be more actively involved with improving standards and quality of service delivery through industry self-regulation and end-user/client industry standards, respectively. On the other hand, African governments in their respective countries should strengthen the capacity of the regulatory authority for effective training, monitoring and supervision of PSFs. They should also review and amend the legal framework for PSFs in a way that promotes specialization and division of function among different PSFs where such is lacking. Additionally, the amendment should include a provision for licensing of individual private security guards and uniform standard of mandatory training for the entry-level staff of PSFs in line with the various components of private security before deployment to their place of primary assignment.
3. Boost Private/Public Policing Partnership: African states should build private security/public policing partnerships to boost cooperation between PSFs and SSFs. In this way, there will be timely and credible intelligence sharing that can prevent the menace of insurgency and terrorism as well as other organised criminal activities. The complicated nature of Africa's contemporary security challenges absolutely requires boosting the level of partnership between PSFs and SSFs.
4. Reduce the Cost of Operating PSF: African states should create the enabling economic environment for professionals and security experts who have an interest in contributing to the security and safety of persons to run a PSF. They should also make the cost of registering and licensing a PSF and the overall cost of doing business cheaper. This will make their services affordable to low income earners, thereby reducing inequality of access to security on the African continent.
5. Promote and Regulate Alternative Non-State Policing Bodies: The numerous and diverse non-state policing bodies in Africa such as neighbourhood watch groups, vigilante groups, and other forms of community policing should be promoted, supported and properly regulated to provide alternatives for the poor who can neither afford the services of PSFs nor access the public police.



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