

GARNET Mobility: Research Project

A “Security Sector Reform” global consensus arena: development and borders

Junior research fellow: Ms Aline Leboeuf, 3rd year PhD candidate, Ifri

Receiving institution: Institute for Commonwealth Studies

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This research proposal aims at contributing to GARNET through strengthened mobility for a Junior research fellow. The GARNET network is built on the idea that improved research connectivity rely on numerous small and decentralized initiatives that, when integrated in a global network, thoroughly contribute to a new working research environment, built on new values and new approaches. While creating new kinds of knowledge on global governance, regionalisation and regulation, GARNET itself contributes to the development, practice and test of a new kind of “soft” epistemic governance. The network has two faces. On one side it aims at progressively changing European research as a practice, by promoting the continued integration of two research institutions within the European research networks. On the other side it aims at transforming research as a common good, by creating the conditions for the delivery of new knowledge. We therefore propose to bring into this complex knowledge-building process a small brick.

This mobility project aims not only at strengthening research capacity building of two GARNET partner institutions (Ifri and ICS) but also at supporting a specific transversal research project that may be able to raise some interesting debates within some parts of the GARNET network.

We propose a critical analysis of global governance, as a fragmented and weak consensus-building process, based on a case study of Security Sector Reform in Sierra Leone. Surprisingly this research does not only concern the field of area studies, development and security studies, but brings on the table a more classical political science reflection on epistemic communities, on the role of ideas and bureaucratic competition in policy processes, and on controversial relations between consensus-building processes and power.

Our main thesis is that “global governance” is an awkward and uncertain arena resulting from the tension between an attempt to build the most inclusive consensus and the weakening process resulting from continued negotiation on the content of this consensus. The more inclusive a consensus, the more loosened its content. A derivate from this thesis is the hypothesis that “global governance” is either a loose reality (a coalition of actors evolving according to constant renegotiations), an empty catchword (everyone is in, but it does not mean anything) or a performing fragmented reality (there are several arenas who may at times pretend to play a role of “global governance” for strategic reasons – like excluding some other actors from the game -, but each of which in fact only covers a small fragment of the world actors, which allows them to build a hard enough consensus on meaning to allow action/performance). One can talk of “global governance” because casual border typologies (like between internal and external security, between states and non state actors, etc.) are not anymore the most useful to apprehend those world relationships.

Whatever its form, “global governance” is framed by shared ideas. If we adopt a truly constructivist approach, we could even say that some dynamics are observed and captured by researchers/decision-makers looking for order in a complex and unordered world. Those

dynamics then are considered as catalysts for reorganization following given values. By taking those dynamics in consideration, analysts contribute in giving them visibility and by so doing tend to strengthen them, insufficiently though to make them “real” beyond a given arena. We would then conclude by saying that epistemic communities contribute to the creation of “quasi-worlds” that never manage to catch up with “real world” complexity, because research/perception is by definition a limited model of the “real world”.

Fragments of global governance are in a way “quasi-worlds”, that frame the consensus-building process between their members (the actors who adhere to them, voluntarily or not) and therefore influence the agenda-setting and the policy-process. Those fragments are loose and can always be tore apart by their members, but it also socializes them in a given conception of the world, and it offers them special resources that compensate for the numerous constraints. Often, those fragments are the result of a process of increased interdependence and recognition of the need for states/administrations/NGOs/researchers to work together rather than in isolation. Those who accept this premise will promote and consolidate each other, a process that could be similar to the one described by Norbert Elias to explain the process of civilisation. This process of consolidation is not neutral in the sense that it implies strong power relationships. Power rests in the control of the consensus content, often thanks to idea inputs that can frame the rational options, following the excellent teaching of the win-win negotiation: those who offer so-called legitimate, rational and expert-based options will more easily convince. Resistance implies either to integrate and loosen the consensus from within or to stay outside of the fragment, question its legitimacy/meaning or when possible, just ignore it.

This framework of analysis can be tested with the study of the development of the idea of “Security Sector Reform”. Indeed in this case we have three types of arenas: the British national one (consensus-building process between DFID, MoD and FCO), the multinational donors arena (European Union, OECD, UNDP, DFID, etc.), and the first case where the SSR idea was tried and implemented by the UK: Sierra Leone (where Sierra Leonean and British actors meet with other players like China, Nigeria, the US, etc.). In all three arenas experts networks have played an important role first through helping put the idea of Security Sector Reform on the agenda; second through helping develop the idea of Security Sector Reform, first for DFID, then for the UK, then for all donor organisations; third through auditing and advising the reform process that was directly taking place in Sierra Leone. Expert networks were conscientiously used by DFID as a tool for consensus-building. In this development process, one has to note that “SSR” while first a “DFID-only” concept has become a catchword for institutional transformation in the security field in the Third World (sometimes limited to the military institution, sometimes including justice sector and Parliamentary control). The definition given of SSR allows for situating an actor in either the military or the development field, while the special name used to refer to “SSR-like processes” (“security and defense sector reform” or “defense sector reform”) easily betrays one author’s nationality; this can be used to draw the external and internal borders of the SSR global consensus arena.