Private Military and Security Companies – obstacle to the realization of SDG 16

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The private military and security industry has been growing steadily since the mid-1980s. In 2009, the global security market was estimated to be worth about US$ 100-165 billion per year, with an annual growth rate of 7-8 percent.[1] This means that the industry today is likely to be worth about US$ 170-300 billion. In addition, a 2011 study estimated the number of employees in the formal private security sector to be between 19.5 and 25.5 million worldwide, a number which exceeds the number of police officers at the global level.[2] Today, Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) provide a wide variety of services, ranging from support to state militaries engaged in conflict to guard services for corporations and individuals and the operation of private prisons.

The private military and security industry directly affects the realization of SDG 16 to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels".

This industry not only directly contributes to conflict violence, it also allows for the reproduction of socio-economic inequality.

PMSCs and conflict. PMSCs play a key role in making conflict possible by outsourcing its political, economic and human cost. In Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, the USA has been able to rely on a workforce of low-paid employees from poor countries, who had been hired by PMSCs sometimes without being aware that they would be working in a war zone.[3] PMSCs have made democratic societies less averse to war by hiding its costs. In an internal memo, the British Ministry of Defence has highlighted that "neither the media nor the public in the West appears to identify with contractors in the way they do with their military personnel. Thus casualties from within the contractorised force are more acceptable in pursuit of military ends than those among our own forces".[4]

In other words, the private military and security industry allows governments to bypass the democratic process by making war more palatable to the public and less amenable to scrutiny.[5]

Availability of weapons. According to a conservative estimate, PMSCs held between 1.7 and 3.7 million firearms worldwide in 2011. This excludes undeclared and illegal weapons, which would likely substantially increase this number. Indeed, PMSCs have been reported to illegally acquire weapons (and poorly stock them) in places such as Afghanistan, Brazil, India, Iraq and Tanzania.[6] The private military and security industry thus increases the availability of weapons in countries both at peace and at war, and increases the risk that these weapons will be used against civilians. A 2009 survey in Israel, for instance, found a link between incidents of domestic violence and homicide and firearms licensed to private security guards.[7]

PMSCs and socio-economic inequality. The private military and security industry has particularly proliferated in States that experience high levels of inequality between wealthy and poor citizens.

1 Abrahamsen/Williams (2009).
2 Florquin (2011).
3 See for instance Stillman (2011).
4 Quoted in: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/sep/26/mod-study-sell-wars-public.
5 Avant/Sigelman (2010).
6 Florquin (2011).
7 Mazali (2009).

As inequalities grow, the rich increasingly barricade themselves in fortified homes guarded by armed personnel, thus bypassing often unreliable police services. This is part of a broader trend that sees the wealthy disengaging from public services. While it is most obvious in emerging economies such as Brazil and South Africa, it also affects wealthier states such as the USA.[8] By providing the security services that allow the wealthy to isolate themselves from the rest of society, the private military and security industry plays a key role in exacerbating inequality.

The prison-industrial complex. In recent years, the private military and security industry has expanded its activities to the management of private prisons and detention centres for immigrants. G4S, the largest private security company in the world, has run prisons (in the UK and South Africa, among others) and immigration detention centres (e.g., in the UK and Australia). According to many critics, the privatization of the prison system is directly leading to an increase in incarceration rates. The American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU), for instance, argues that the construction of prisons run on a for-profit basis leads to unjust incarceration, which disproportionately affects marginalized minorities.[9]

Efforts at better regulation of the private military and security industry go only some way towards addressing these pressing issues. Ultimately, PMSCs are not only a symptom of political choices that have led to conflict and increased inequality, they also make these very choices possible.

8 Pastor (2003).

9 Shapiro (2011).

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