



# INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of  
the National Academy of Public Administration,  
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs  
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,  
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series:

Policing

Interview no.:

16

Interviewee: Dr. Osman Gbla

Interviewer: Arthur Boutellis

Date of Interview: May 5, 2008

Location: Center for Development and Security Analysis  
Freetown  
Sierra Leone

Innovations for Successful Societies, Bobst Center for Peace and Justice  
Princeton University, 83 Prospect Avenue, Princeton, New Jersey, 08544, USA  
[www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties](http://www.princeton.edu/successfulsocieties)

BOUTELLIS: Today is May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and I am now with Dr. Osman Gbla at the Center for Development and Security Analysis in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I'll let you introduce yourself further in the first part of the interviewer. First thank you for your time. Before we start the interview I'd like you to confirm that you've given your consent.

GBLA: Yes, I have given my consent.

BOUTELLIS: I'd like to start by asking you about your personal background, give us a brief overview and particularly how did you come about getting involved into security and police reform related issues.

GBLA: *I am Dr. Osman Gbla, currently Dean of the Faculty of Social Science and Law for Fourah Bay College in the University of Sierra Leone and also founder the Center for Development and Security Analysis. I am a graduate, I have a BA in Political Science, a Master of Science in Economics, major in Political Science and a Ph.D. in Political Science. My Ph.D. thesis was about ECWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and West African security, looking beyond peacekeeping to see how conflict prevention could be a very vibrant strategy to prevent conflicts in Africa. Through my research I have been doing work in the area of peace, security and development specific focus on West Africa.*

*My research interest basically is conflict, conflict resolution and post conflict rebuilding, security sector reform including regional security matters and also civil society and governance in Africa. I've done lots of work in that area. As lecturer in the Department of Political Science, I have been teaching classes ranging from Contemporary African Political Systems to Politics of Develop and Regional Security. So with all this research and interest and academic background, I have a very specific focus in the area of peace, security and governance. Of course the area of security sector reform has been very close to my heart, especially as a researcher that has experienced the transition from authoritarian, single-party, to multi-party democracy in Africa in which the security sector is very key in determining performance in these areas.*

BOUTELLIS: Can you give us maybe, you mentioned this transition that took place and is taking place in lots of countries in Africa, particularly in West Africa. Can you give us your own description of the transition, how it happened in Sierra Leone in terms of security sector reform and more specifically the police reform and your assessment of where we stand now.

GBLA: *As I rightly pointed out, Sierra Leone has been in transition from war to peace and from authoritarian and single-party to multi-party democracy. So you have a double-edged transition. Double-edged in the sense of transforming an authoritarian single-party and military to a multi-party system. In 1978 the country was declared a one-party state. Within that configuration there was very little in terms of transparency and governance of the security sector. In fact, there was an amount of politicization of the security sector including the police and the military.*

*In the 1970s, for example, the head of the military and the police were members of Parliament and in such a situation it was very difficult to subject the security sector to firm control, civilian control in particular. Under military dictatorship, in*

---

*1992, there was a military coup under the National Provisional Ruling Council which went from 1992 to 1996. Then again, in 1997, May to February 1998, there was also a military interregnum. You realize within such a political system it was difficult for democratic governance of the security sector, especially under the military rule. It was very difficult, for example, to subject the military or police budget to scrutiny in Parliament because Parliament was nonfunctional at the time under that regime. Under one-party state you see there was very little in terms of very equally run debates of issues. Also that went into the security sector. And of course even before the outbreak of the war in 1991, there was a lot to be done in the area of the security sector, especially with the police.*

*For example, look at recruitment. You had rules that determined recruitment but they were patronized, patronage was very high there. There was the card system, the party card system which determined the influx of people into the security sector, especially the police and the military. This more or less mortgaged professionalism because in most cases your loyalty was highly determinant in getting you recruited. So that was how you got in the military and the police people who did not have the required professional background to come into the military.*

*So when the war came in, the rebels were faced with sometimes an undisciplined and unprofessional military that was demoralized in terms of poor conditions. So it was very easy for them. You realize there was the security issue wherein military guys transformed themselves into rebels by night and becoming military men by day. So all things are getting bad. Ranks were usurped. When the military took over people were promoted just like that from one rank to another. With the poor living condition and poor conditions of service in the military and the police, there was then the need for some form of reform of our security sector.*

**BOUTELLIS:** In what context did the security sector reform, particularly the police reform, although the military reform was done in parallel in Sierra Leone? In what context did that happen?

**GBLA:** *As I write, it was within the context of post war reconstruction and peace building intervention. That created an appropriate opportunity to overhaul the entire system itself because you know the security forces are also part of the problem in the war. At the end of the war there was need for them to be reformed. In fact, a complete overhaul of the entire city was done because too many things were no good. It started proper in 1996 because some people want to look at the reform from 1998 with the British intervention. But I realize when ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) was here, they were requested to do a review of the ranks in the military, so that started.*

*And interestingly the SSR (Security Sector Reform) in this country is very interesting because it took place during a war situation because some people thought it would be very difficult for a reform process to be put in place when there was war. But it went in tandem with war and there was the restructuring program. You realize the war officially came to an end in January 2002 but the reform process started as far back as 1998. It was very, very effective with the police for example. One thing I realize in the police reform process, there was a change management system introduced, top management level thinking, relating to policy and all that before going down into the lower ranks.*

---

*For example you have the CDIID (Complaints, Discipline, Internal Investigation Department) and it was more or less Xeroxed under the community policing concept wherein they believe there should be interface between civilians and the police for them to be very effective. Then you have local policing boards all over the country. These were more or less created because the concept of policing then shifted a little bit wherein you have high-handed police trying to take charge of the situation. Now you have a situation where they think the police should work with the civilians, the community themselves, for them to be very effective. That created some dividends. That created confidence between the civilians and the police and also the reform process has to take onboard the deplorable conditions of service. You know low salary, poor living conditions.*

BOUTELLIS: To give an idea, how does a salary of a policeman, a constable compare to the salary of a teacher or other professional?

GBLA: *It was low, very, very low. And these people were tasked with the responsibility of securing lives and maintaining internal security. That was dangerous.*

BOUTELLIS: When you said the reform, at least the police reform really started in '98 was very effective, the particularity of Sierra Leone at the highest level there was the implant of UK police commissioners. Is that part of the very effective reform? Which level, if you had to point to the few main elements—?

GBLA: *Initially it was eternally driven and you can understand the situation at the time because the country was just coming out of war. The funds were not there. Most of the first members were more or less, had some problems professionally. So there was need at that point in time to have somebody at the top coming from the outside. But when time progressed in the reform process, top management also trained very high-level Sierra Leoneans so the national ownership impetus later entered because these people were trained to take over after the British would have left. That was how the current IG (Inspector General) was sported out during the process of the reform. You have top people who can also take over.*

BOUTELLIS: Currently we'll get into some technical areas afterwards, but what would be your assessment of the law and order and crime situation currently maybe compared to a couple of years back.

GBLA: *As you can see Sierra Leone sometimes it beats the imagination of too many people. As a post war country we will have seen the institution of high crime rates. But I think there has been a lot of sensitization and lots of training within the police force to handle crime. What I think is most highly required is more than techniques to handle crime. The people are just coming from war. Most of them will be scared with a very high presence of police, it's gone. And for example where you want to disperse, strike demonstrators. We have cannon water tanks to do that. We need for crowd management.*

BOUTELLIS: For crowd management and riot control?

GBLA: *Yes. You see also a situation where you have lots of sensitization or security issues. You see in the past there used to be too much secrecy about security matters. But now you have for example the DISECs, the District Security Committees, you have the Provisional Security Committees in which the civilians sitting with the police and security forces to discuss issues pertaining to security. Then you also have this local needs policing. The local needs policing has also*

---

*created some effective, because you now are creating a situation where the locals are participating. It is their own business to ensure that their security, because the security is for them. You see, there is an issue of emphasis now from physical security of the state to that of human security which also has some relevance in our situation. Now we are not only worried about the state security about us, we're also worried about the security of the human being himself, human rights violations, guaranteeing the rights of the citizens. The educational programs being introduced, human rights education for example within the police force. That is also sensitizing members of the police force. They have to be very, very sensitive to the rights and dignity of the people. This is also creating some confidence. With that type of training the police I'm sure will know how to handle the people.*

BOUTELLIS: Are there training programs aside from human rights training that caught your attention or that you have somewhat been involved in?

GBLA: *Yes many because you see, this human rights training has been carried on in many hundreds. There has been training for local authorities, there has been training for the police. There has been training even for civil society groups working in the area of the security sector. In fact, our center is trying to do that because we believe, for example, we are saying there is a need for even a training program for journalists on how to report issues of security sector reform because there is, for example, quite a good number of people who do report in on the security, but do they even know about the basic national security architecture and the reform process itself. So we need this type of training.*

BOUTELLIS: Can you describe some of the training that the Center for Development and Security Analysis has done?

GBLA: *Yes, for example, we had a project with the center for torture victims in Denmark. We did a study on the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation) in this country. We recruited about eight national researchers, young researchers. We brought them here, we gave them training in methodology, how to go into communities, how to appeal to them. We also participated in the security sector review document. We prepared it for ONS, The Office of National Security; we did a booklet on the SSR. That booklet has lots of information. We proposed to the Office of National Security that we do training at the local level on this SSR review booklet so that these people can also take it on board, they can understand what the review process has been about.*

BOUTELLIS: Are there some aspects of training that are lacking you think?

GBLA: *Yes. What we believe is is that most civil society groups that are working on security sector issues, don't have very thorough understanding about the national security architecture and the security sector reform. If these people are going to engage in these issues, they need the training.*

BOUTELLIS: How have you, the training that you have actually conducted, how do you evaluate the impact of this type of sensitization lecturing? Have you see any changes over the time?

GBLA: *Yes. For example, working with local communities we are now beginning to see a receptive perception of the local communities about the police. Immediately after the war people didn't want to see security people because they think these are*

---

*the people that were responsible. But after getting interaction, because we also do what we call peace, security and development roundtables here. Normally we bring together members of the security forces, practitioners and government officials, civil society together, to engage, to deliberate on issues of security.*

*For example, the latest of our roundtables was on the role of women in peace, security and governance. This frank discussion has created some confidence among these people.*

BOUTELLIS: You seem to be very keen on the issues of accountability of the security sector, particularly of the police because you're also a member of the civil society and you work with them. You mentioned the importance of, for instance, the creation of an institution like the CDIID where complaints can be brought to the attention of the police about the police. Can you describe for us the different mechanisms for the community to be able to access the police for this kind of thing and how effective are they in practice.

GBLA: *Yes, as I've told you we now have the local policing boards, nation wide. In fact normally these local police boards, they call them local police partnership boards. Normally the locals are in charge and the police are there. They get a series of information, a series of discussion about the needs of the local needs policing. Through this mechanism also the civilians can also know what is going on in the security...*

BOUTELLIS: So the police brief the community as well.

GBLA: Yes.

BOUTELLIS: How often do these happen?

GBLA: *I think it is monthly.*

BOUTELLIS: And it is in the big cities as well as in the smaller areas?

GBLA: *Yes, also the smaller areas because you have the DISECs, you have the PROSEC (Provisional Security Committees) members also part of this local police partnership boards.*

BOUTELLIS: Since when do these exist?

GBLA: *I think two years back they were introduced.*

BOUTELLIS: And the participation is still as active?

GBLA: *Yes, a month ago we were in Kenema where we conducted a workshop, a review of one of the projects we are doing. We had the ambassador of this local needs policing board coming to the meeting and they spoke highly of how these boards have been very instrumental in assuring security. The one thing that is coming out in this country clearly is that people no longer joke with the security because of the lessons of the war. They don't want to take security lightly. So they see it as a very serious business. They don't just leave it in the hands of the security forces.*

- BOUTELLIS: Are there complaints? The CDIID is based within the police, it's part of the Sierra Leone Police. Do people actually go to the police to complain about behavior of other policemen for instance?
- GBLA: *They do. For the mere fact that there is now that mechanism in existence. I think it is also driving the message to the police that you are no longer just go scott free when you abuse your office. I think—because some people say “I would take you to the CDIID, I will go to the complaint section”. That would scare away the police. I only hope they will implement what the complaints they receive and translate them into actions to ensure that the impunities committed by policemen are nipped in the bud.*
- BOUTELLIS: Have there been cases where the complaints brought to the CDIID resulted in action?
- GBLA: *I haven't done much research in that area so I don't think I can answer that.*
- BOUTELLIS: In terms of public perceptions in general of the police, has there been some study done and what are the indicators of change in that regard?
- GBLA: *I think so. For example, six months back we did a security perception survey with the Institute for International affairs in Germany. In Hamburg, the Institute for International Affairs, African Affairs<sup>1</sup>. People generally, the results, the analysis of our perceptions showed that increasingly people are getting a very positive image of the police and the security situation in the country.*
- BOUTELLIS: What are the major shortcomings maybe that the population points to?
- GBLA: *Some people are still seeing the conditions of service of the police are still not that high and they still need support. If you want to talk about corruption for example, we really need to improve on the conditions of the police. Also people express fear about still the delays in court prosecution.*
- BOUTELLIS: What form does corruption take typically? When you talk about corruption, what does it mean concretely?
- GBLA: *In traffic, and in courts.*
- BOUTELLIS: So traffic police. You mentioned one of the major stakes of security sector reform was also the depoliticization of the security sector because of the previous history of it. Where are we in the depoliticization?
- GBLA: *If you look at the new recruitment codes, it is emphasizing for example to make sure you have a balanced force drawn from each... Make sure you don't allow ethnicity or gender to enter into the calculation. Make sure you set professional standards in the academic qualification. There is also the requirement that sometimes your community will also identify you because you don't want to get criminals into the forces.*
- BOUTELLIS: How do you get inputs from the community regarding the background of the recruit?

---

<sup>1</sup> ? Institute of African Affairs - <http://www.getcited.org/inst/152759>

GBLA: *You go through the Permanent Chiefs to get the character of people. The Chiefs.*

BOUTELLIS: So the Sierra Leone Police reflect the ethnic balance of Sierra Leone? That is in the charter?

GBLA: *I think you put in place transparent mechanisms of recruitment. This will not particularly appeal to any ethnicity or region.*

BOUTELLIS: Based on the qualifications.

GBLA: *Yes, the qualifications.*

BOUTELLIS: So there are no ethnic quotas or anything?

GBLA: *No.*

BOUTELLIS: So it is professional standards. In terms of the current police there has been recently a change in the President since late 2007. Has this created any changes in top management of the police? Have the Sierra Leone Police successfully passed the test of a change in government?

GBLA: *In the first place they played a very crucial role in maintaining security during the elections. They were highly commended, did a very professional job. I think in the post election environment, they are also exhibiting their professionalism and I'm sure with more training and more conditions the results will be better.*

BOUTELLIS: Are there some obstacles to—?

GBLA: *To reform?*

BOUTELLIS: Yes, to the reform of the police?

GBLA: *Yes of course. It has to do with the sustainability of the reform process. You see most of the reforms are coming from the outside. In the absence of the funds, how do we get to continue this? The second thing is you also have people who resist change from within, who think change will affect them. So sometimes you also have internal constraints to the reform process, especially those who think they will not benefit from the change process itself. So these are some of the obstacles. The others are basically also it has to do with the conditions of service, and with the absence of funds it will also be difficult to improve. [interruption]*

BOUTELLIS: This is the second part of the interview with Dr. Osman Gbla. We were talking about some of the obstacles to the reform process. Now I'd like to ask you, maybe, what are some of the broader challenges in general. You mentioned that you participated in the national security review and police booklets and security sector reform and I want to ask you if there are some tasks that need to be prioritized over others when looking at security sector reform?

GBLA: *In fact I've been saying this in most of my interviews. In terms of improving the security forces themselves, in terms of their combat readiness, I think a lot has been done. But in the area of civilian oversight and accountability of the forces, we need a lot to be done in that area. That is security sector governance. For example, you have the Committee on Defense and Presidential Security in*

---

*Parliament. They have the capacity to provide oversight over the security forces. This issue of security sector governance needs very serious attention. That is how do we get civil society to ensure the security forces to be accountable and transparent? How do we get Parliament to ensure that funds given to the security forces are being used judiciously? How do we get them to account? That aspect is a challenge. Also in the area of security sector reform in this part of the world you also have to look at divisional realities. The forces are crisscrossing.*

*The Manou river union and Sahel region, we have ECOMOG forces here to change the situation. We have also an international peacekeeping force coming here. So you are not only preparing the security forces to respond to national realities but also to solve regional realities. So do we have that being done seriously? We have many border crossing points for example. We have the small arms for the future. We have the movement of armed groups. You know the integration process maybe these went very well, the disarmament and the demobilization, but the integration of ex-combatants did not go too well because of lack of funds. Some of them are now in Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, and they will be a security threat. So how do we prepare our security forces to take charge of this situation when this issue arises? It will also be a challenge. And also, you know we have with the SSR, we have the MACP, the Military Aid to Civil Power wherein the police have been given the bulk of the task to take care of internal security and to only interface with the military under a very serious crisis and arrangement. But now, with that situation you also have to give more funds to the police because they have a lot to do. Of course, you know, as a post-war country you have a youthful population with unemployment also very high. So this situation also creates room for insecurity, so how do you also get the security forces to respond to this reality?*

BOUTELLIS: In terms of the police needs more funds, is it for the existing, to reinforce and better equip the existing police that would be of 9,500 approximately, or is it also to increase the number possibly?

GBLA: *Not to increase, really, but to improve upon their conditions, the barracks, uniforms, the equipment.*

BOUTELLIS: Where do police officers live currently?

GBLA: *There have quarters but sometimes they don't have enough quarters. Even some of the quarters, they need to be rehabilitated.*

BOUTELLIS: All police officers live within police quarters?

GBLA: *They're supposed to be living in barracks, yes.*

BOUTELLIS: But within the communities.

GBLA: Yes.

BOUTELLIS: They're not like the military in barracks outside of the cities.

GBLA: *No, no.*

BOUTELLIS: What kinds of allies in the country, in Sierra Leone, are essential for the success of the reform, who should be on board?

- 
- GBLA: *The international community to provide the funds, the many actors from the outside. You also have the civil society, the communities themselves, and the police themselves, the higher ranking and the lower ranks as well.*
- BOUTELLIS: When you mentioned the importance of Parliament and civil society oversight, there have been a number of initiatives for some kind of civil society oversight. What are some concrete suggestions that you have to make in terms of improving this oversight?
- GBLA: *In the first place, training. We need to train these committees. For example, the Committee on Defense and Presidential Security. They need to understand the security architecture itself and also the reform process itself. With this knowledge they would also be able to do something. The other thing we've just concluded, and I hope they told you about it. We did a capacity needs assessment of the Presidential Defense Committee. We also realized that the committee itself is constrained in many ways. They don't have adequate clerks to help them do the documentation of, their work. They don't have a library. They don't have computers and they don't even have office space where they can sit and do their job effectively. So all this. And for civil society they also need training. Many civil society don't think we have anything to do with security because they are afraid, but now we are telling them no, you have to venture out because it is the taxpayers money that they are spending on the security forces. So you have to have a voice in how these people carry themselves along.*
- BOUTELLIS: In terms of achievements, are there some particular experiments or innovations that you think merit particular attention in the course of the police reform, some aspects that have been really successful?
- GBLA: *Yes, of course. The top management policing level. When you have a strategic management system now wherein the top people do lots of thinking, critical reflections on how to carry about policing, that creates sanity in the police force. That creates foresight. That creates informed decisions on policy making. Now you have spoken to the police themselves, they have management boards, the different AIGs (Additional Inspector General), they have collapsed most of the ranks.*
- BOUTELLIS: So that is for the internal management of the police.
- GBLA: Yes.
- BOUTELLIS: Any other aspects of police reform, maybe building community policing and so on, are there some areas of success?
- GBLA: *Yes, the Police Partnership Boards for example, very innovative, very laudable because they have created avenues for very frequent interaction between the police and the local people to ensure confidence, to ensure security, to work as a team, promoting security.*
- BOUTELLIS: As you mentioned earlier, police reform, especially when it has input from the outside will always cost a considerable amount of money. Are there any programs in particular that are maybe not that expensive but yielded very good benefits?

---

GBLA: *Those that are from within?*

BOUTELLIS: Either within or sponsored by the international community.

GBLA: *As I've told you, the creation of this awareness building, sensitization programs on the security sector reform itself and the creation of fora for interaction between and among the security forces, the practitioners, the decision makers and civil society is also paying dividends.*

BOUTELLIS: Now maybe one last question. The donors have been very involved through the whole process, particularly the British, the UN when there was a peacekeeping mission here, has donor support been sustained and are there any suggestions you would make in terms of the relation between the donor and the country that could be improved or some policy changes and management changes that could be made?

GBLA: *What I would say in the area of donor support, in the first place it is coordination. You have many donors doing many things in the area of SSR but they did coordinate among themselves as well to avoid duplication. Another area is also for these donors to work against the background of the realities of the nation. That is taking into consideration the social, economic and cultural realities. I think there has been some success in that area because I think there are now fora created a mechanism for the interaction between the donors and the government itself and the people, for them to look at how the process should be. The other area again is the sustained support of programs. To me, it will not be helpful if you support a security sector intervention and you don't see it consolidated and you leave. It means all your gains will pull off. So this should be sustained international support.*

BOUTELLIS: Are there any specific points that we haven't discussed that you'd like to make in terms of maybe the way forward?

GBLA: *I think I'm okay.*

BOUTELLIS: Dr. Osman Gbla, thank you very much.