

RESEARCH ARTICLE · CAPACITY BUILDING

Challenges to Maritime Security Capacity Building

Elsie Amelia Tachie-Menson

Researcher, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC)

Katja Lindsov Jacobsen

Researcher, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research, Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC)

Ransford E.V. Gyampo

Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Ghana, Legon

ABSTRACT

There are several challenges to maritime security capacity building in West Africa. One such challenge relates to the prioritisation of some maritime crimes over others. Such background prioritisations inform the provision of capacity building, which is then geared to help combat crimes like piracy, selected by donors, whilst sometimes neglecting other important dangers in the maritime domain including the pervasive burden of illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing as a longstanding concern raised by coastal states in the Gulf of Guinea region. In 2011 and 2012, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for instance, acknowledged only the problem of maritime piracy in Resolutions 2018 and 2039. However, without a holistic appreciation of the various challenges to maritime security and a relatedly broader intervention approach that recognizes challenges beyond piracy, maritime security and the blue economy in West Africa will remain in danger. This article explores the ramifications of matching maritime capacity-building interventions to corresponding and diversely prioritised maritime crimes, as well as issues posed to the regional blue economy and overall state and regional security if security capacity is not addressed more broadly and, in a manner, that takes regional priorities seriously. The Ghanaian situation will serve as a case study. Other Gulf of Guinea states are considered briefly to illustrate the direct and indirect effects of deprioritizing other maritime crimes in the effort to disrupt Gulf of Guinea piracy.

Keywords: Maritime security; Capacity building; unintended consequences; under-prioritised crimes

Introduction

Maritime security and the overall blue economy of West Africa will be jeopardised without appropriate maritime capacity-building interventions that address a broad range of crimes at sea. Insofar as all crimes in the maritime domain, like piracy, oil crime, IUU, drugs smuggling and others, including their various onshore dimensions, cannot be addressed comprehensively

all at once, it is crucial to pay attention to the often-backgrounded mechanisms through which crimes gain priority, whilst others remain neglected.

From the perspective of regional states along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, maritime crimes, also along Ghana's coastline, have evolved and threatened to spread, with Illegal, Unregulated, Unreported (IUU) fishing crimes taking the lead. The crime of IUU fishing includes using microfilament nets for fishing and using chemicals, explosives, and other unsustainable methods to bait and harvest fish. In the same maritime region, piracy and armed robbery have also evolved and have long – in their changing forms – represented a threat to maritime trade, the safety of seafarers and the overall security of this maritime domain. In Ghana, there have been several armed robberies at sea, culminating in heightened fears among many, about the possibility of pirate attacks, a phenomenon which has in recent times, been of great concern to the international community in the Gulf of Guinea (GoG). As mentioned above, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) recognised the threat of piracy in Resolutions 2018 in 2011 and 2039 in 2012. As a result, the Gulf of Guinea has been identified as a hotspot for maritime piracy, and donor agencies as well as governments have provided resources and capacity-building programmes aimed at dealing with piracy. Yet, the parallel threat represented by IUU fishery has for several years been a largely neglected type of crime, compared to the attention granted to piracy.

This brief discussion of parallel but differentially prioritised maritime crimes contextualises challenges relating not only to how capacity-building programmes can be optimized or coordinated once delivered but to the often-backgrounded question of mechanisms at play in determining which crimes these programmes address in the first place. Put differently, recognising some crimes over others eventually translates into disparities in prioritisation in maritime capacity-building programmes delivered in the name of maritime security. Moreover, as this article argues, this also leads to a mix of unintended consequences related to an underlying capacity-crime/ threat mismatch. For example, piracy has consistently received a lot of attention from external and regional stakeholders. As a result, there has been a massive provision of capacity to address piracy, notably where piracy takes the form of kidnap-for-ransom piracy, leaving un-prioritised what coastal states themselves have long identified as the most prevalent crime, namely IUU fishing. This article discusses the implications of matching capacity building to maritime crimes and the challenges posed to Ghana's blue economy and overall security if dynamics at play in the very identification and subsequent matching of security capacity provision and crime/threat assessment, are not addressed.

Conceptualising capacity building Looking at today's intervention landscape, stabilisation (Albrecht & Clausen 2021) is an umbrella term for a myriad of engagement types carried out by a range of different actors (bilateral/ multilateral, public/private, military/non-military). One type of engagement is security capacity building, which refers to activities as varied as military exercises, training of police or mock trials involving lawyers, to knowledge production and classroom seminars. Cutting across these various activities is an overall aim, namely, to strengthen the capacity of local, national, or regional actors, for these actors to be better positioned ('post'-capacity building) to address a range of different security challenges: from

counterpiracy or counterterrorism to border management (land and sea) and crime prevention. Where such capacity-building engagements focus specifically on security forces, practitioners and scholars alike have preferred using the term security force assistance. While capacity building is framed as a type of engagement that emphasises local, national and regional actors, their ownership, and the handing over of responsibility to these actors for addressing geographically proximate security threats, critics argue that capacity building alongside other stabilisation engagements in effect outsources, for example, “Europe’s security priorities”, and form part of a broader “externalisation of global security work”. Eade (2010) calls it a one-way process that undermines the capacity of receptor organisations. Such criticism highlights some of the less visible dynamics at play in capacity-building engagements, including the issue of focusing such engagements on crimes and threats that align with the security priorities of donors who, based on that, direct resources towards certain areas rather than others – be it border management in the Sahel rather than livelihood challenges, or piracy in the Gulf of Guinea rather than maritime crimes that threaten the security of the region, as well as livelihoods that, from a different perspective, are seen as more important to local, national and/or regional security. Further, and still, in a broader sense, the question of, “Who builds the capacity of who?” remains crucially important but often backgrounded in favour of more easily agreeable questions about improved coordination amongst the numerous capacity-building programmes, the focus on which has already been decided. Indeed, the discourse regarding the parties involved, the power dynamics, and the priorities of both donors and recipients have long been contentious.

2. Unintended consequences. Security Capacity: Three Types of Unintended Use

Capacity-building efforts are often defined as successful with reference to different kinds of delivery aims: successful simulation trials, successful training sessions, successful exercises, where ‘success’ often refers to the completion of a simulation, training session or exercise from which specific actors have been able to enhance their capacity. A specific number of actors have successfully completed a specific course, which now means that, for example their interdiction or vessel boarding capacity, has been successfully enhanced. Yet, this logic defines success in a way that ignores key questions including the issue of what happens after delivery? What happens to these accounts of successful capacity building if we explore the flow of different ‘capacity’ beyond classrooms and training sessions? Where does capacity flow after intervention actors hand over or finish a training session?

2.1 Unintended (‘no use’) Consequences

Various examples have been seen where capacity-building programmes were challenged at the level of mismatched donations, ultimately contributing to ineffective engagements given that such donations are not used and thus will not contribute to providing improved maritime security. This was, for example, seen when visiting a Special Forces Headquarters building in a Gulf of Guinea coastal state. The HQ courtyard was full of tires donated by a large donor, but never used since the amount and the type was wrongly assessed (if assessed at all). One

unintended consequence in such cases – of which there are many more – is a mismatch between donors who feel they have generously delivered donations and host state actors who encounter unusable donations, either where tires don't match pickup trucks or for several other reasons, including maintenance challenges or interoperability challenges, both of which hinder making use of donor-delivered equipment. Moreover, another type of 'no use' challenge relates not so much to mismatched capacity donations, but to challenges in the political structure in which the particular security capacity is embedded. Moving from the Gulf of Guinea to the Horn of Africa, where significant security force assistance has also been undertaken, we find an illustrative example of how political structures and dynamics can ultimately imply 'no use' of even operational security capacity. Put differently, if there are unaddressed challenges and political disagreements at the level of the political structure within which a security force capacity is embedded and depends for its operationalization, such challenges may make it unlikely that there can be agreement on the use of a military capacity, which donors have spent years helping regional actors build up and get operational. Paradoxically, the East African Standby Force (EASF) is a 'success' because it has moved from being only partly operational to now, in principle, being fully operational.

2.2 Prevented use

When exploring post-classroom use of capacity received through various donor-funded pieces of training, additional challenges become visible. Below we describe two different types of prevented use: cases where institutional logics prevent the capacity from being used after training sessions end, and cases where political logics prevent the use of security capacity.

Examples of how institutional logic may unintentionally result in capacity not being used after training has been 'successfully' delivered include examples from our research where respondents describe how some agencies may nominate officers who may for example have no interface with maritime security at all or are not directly involved in crucial maritime security engagements and programmes. Interviewees also point to various examples of individuals being transferred to positions where the capacity that they have received cannot translate into better security. There are examples of such re-positioning happening due to organisations' turn-over logics: lawyers trained in maritime law being moved to new positions where this training is useless, and leaving such positions to individuals who again lack capacity to enforce law at sea. In other words, institutional logics at play in particular contexts may turn into obstacles to the flow and intended use of capacity. For example, for workshops and training, as part of capacity building, directors and high-level individuals are invited and trained. Yet, the effectiveness of this capacity-building training is challenged in the absence of a system where an individual who receives capacity is part of structures to ensure progression (rather than repetition) for the individual and/or structures designed to ensure that individuals pass on knowledge to others, thereby ensuring a different continuity. The absence of such structures sometimes represents an impediment. For example, after capacity-building sessions, an individual could be transferred or promoted with a resulting loss of that capacity in a position where that person was expected to make a positive difference vis-à-vis maritime security.

Whilst several cases suggest that the use of security capacity may not be prevented as a result of deliberate ‘policing’ but due to various underappreciated institutional logics, other cases suggest that such institutional logics do not explain all challenges to the use of security capacity ‘post’-delivery. Sometimes respondents describe examples of how political logics may at times play an overlooked role in hindering the effective use of security capacity post-classroom training. For example, our research suggests that some individuals who have received capacity-building training are sometimes prevented from or policed when they attempt to use their newly strengthened capacity in contexts ‘beyond’ the training setting. There are examples of interviewees describing how a successful arrest was made utilising skills gained in capacity-building sessions, but then several respondents explained a deep disappointment when returning to work the next day to see that an apprehended vessel or an arrested individual has been released. As stressed by a Navy representative who described one example of how a vessel that was confiscated had been released again the following day, building the capacity of the Navy will not resolve that crucial political challenge directly. Other examples include cases where individuals explain how they will not actively make use of their capacity because they fear that this would result in them being deliberately relocated to positions that prevent them from translating classroom ‘content’ into practices against specific maritime security challenges. In other words, capacity building is not only improved by better coordination of existing programmes but must at the same time include politically sensitive challenges, including more or less explicit complacency in pockets within host state security architectures that are often beyond the scope of what capacity building actors have been invited to address.

Such challenges have been observed across several capacity-building contexts, which is mentioned here to stress that this is not unique to Ghana, nor to the Gulf of Guinea more broadly. Fieldwork in Kenya for example illustrates tendencies of political interference to inhibit effectively translating capacity-building training into practices that enhance maritime capacity as envisioned by donors. An example surfaced during an interview with a highly-skilled, well-educated, and ‘capacity-built’ coast guard in Mombasa, Kenya, who noted (under conditions of anonymity) that: ‘If I do my job well, I will be moved to a different location where I cannot interfere with this smuggling activity.’ He knew very well where the drugs being smuggled were coming in, at a location near his post. He also knew that if he was to put his skills to use to stop the smuggling, ‘then I will simply be replaced by senior people higher up in the hierarchy – they are paid to allow this to happen.’ If we move back to the case of Ghana, a Ghanaian naval officer reports: ‘There are times when we went to skilfully arrest vessels involved in illegal activities and other IUU fishing expeditions on high seas. But by the time we arrived at the ports and before processing for courts, orders were given by superiors and ‘from above’ for the release of those vessels because of certain hidden interests and what goes on behind the scenes.’ In a somewhat similar vein, a well-trained lawyer who had received capacity-building training from numerous donor-funded capacity-building programmes to ensure a ‘legal finish’ in the case of Somali piracy noted in an interview: ‘Every time I have a high-level case, all the evidence has been destroyed ... so even with all the training I have received, there is nothing I can do.’

2.3 Unintended capacity use: e.g., against ‘wrong’ threat

When external actors, with mandates to conduct capacity-building, focused on enhanced maritime security, more specifically countering maritime piracy, train Special Forces in certain West African coastal states, these engagements take place in contexts where coastal states often confront not only maritime security challenges but also several security challenges onshore. Such onshore security challenges include but are not limited to the threat of terrorism. The case of terrorism is introduced not so much to suddenly shift the focus of the article away from the maritime but to show why it is necessary to appreciate a broader threat perception when training security forces that are not solely maritime in their operations. Where the underlying threat analysis on the part of external actors does not align with how host state actors view the seriousness of different threats, there is a risk that when training sessions end, the trained security actors might be used not primarily to counter piracy but to counter-terrorism, seen by the host state as a more pertinent threat. As a result, maritime security capacity building will not improve maritime security of underlying mismatches if threat perception remains unaddressed with security forces that have been trained for counterpiracy and are subsequently used in counterterror operations. This point then in turn links to the argument about underlying differences in how external and regional actors perceive and prioritise threats, onshore and at sea, hence the next section on unaddressed security challenges.

3. Unaddressed security challenges: selective capacity building

In addition to the importance of appreciating the above-mentioned limitations to capacity building engagements, it is indeed also crucially important to appreciate limitations that – as alluded to in the introduction – begin not once a programme unfolds, but much earlier: at the point where the focus of such capacity building is decided in the first place. Accordingly, this section contextualises and adds to the abovementioned challenges by returning to the significance of recognising under-prioritised maritime crimes (IUU fishing crimes) in capacity-building efforts in Ghana, and beyond. Piracy, as a prominent example of maritime crime, has received a lot of attention from the international community, as well as from donors, including donors engaged in or funding other actors in carrying out a myriad of capacity-building programmes. While piracy has rightly been a menace to the Somali region as well as the Gulf of Guinea region, it is nevertheless still significant for donors to explore the specificities of security priorities for various states in which counter-piracy capacity building is carried out. Overemphasising the threat of piracy could be the result of unawareness. Yet, coastal states have long stressed their concerns about other maritime security challenges. In the Gulf of Guinea, while maritime piracy may generally prevail, respective regional states are plagued by a variety of other specific maritime crimes based on their unique contexts. While piracy is a looming threat in Ghana’s waters, it is not a predominant crime across Ghanaian territorial waters. In the northern parts of the Gulf of Guinea, Ghana, Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire, are the leading maritime commerce destination states, attracting substantial shipping traffic. In the case of Ghana, while the prevalence of armed robbery at sea evinces the possibility of maritime piracy, IUU fishing crimes are the most prevalent maritime crime along the state’s coastline and Ghana has received a lot of agential and donor attention. Although

the threatening effects of IUU fishing are readily apparent, these crimes are not prioritised in efforts to build capacity to combat maritime crimes. In addition, when the nation and its state agencies do receive capacity, it is frequently geared towards combating maritime piracy. These failures or limited logics of capacity-building scope and success prevent an appreciation of the significance of recognising under-prioritised maritime crimes (IUU fishing crimes) in capacity-building efforts in Ghana. They go on to further exacerbate existing naval crimes as they are neglected and left to compound. Pirates in Somalia and other parts of the world have attributed the motivation for their activities to the ruthless depletion of fish stock by foreign fishers.¹⁶ Although this argument does not justify piracy, it reveals the influence of IUU crimes on other crimes.

The Stimson Centre suggests,

“Illicit networks are known to participate in IUU fishing, such as those linked to piracy and terrorism, as well as trafficking drugs, arms, and people. These groups often co-opt workers in the legal fishing industry, use fishing vessels to disguise operations, and take advantage of disenfranchised fishers to facilitate their illicit business.”

In Ghana, IUU fishing crimes like illegal transshipment mainly perpetrated by foreigners, are suspected to be a medium for other crimes like drug trafficking or exchange of different illegal substances. In an interview with a Staff from the Ghana Fisheries Commission, it was revealed that items exchanged during transshipment cannot be verified and there have been instances where young girls have been put on board to serve as prostitutes on the ships.

The link between IUU fishing crimes and other maritime crimes constitutes a threat to national security. As analysed by Poling and Cronin in the American context, such threats also significantly affect revenues in Ghana. IUU fishing affects national security in two ways. First, it directly supports illicit networks engaged in the trafficking of narcotics, weapons, wildlife, and people, along with other maritime crimes—all issues that represent non-traditional security threats to the United States and other nations. Second, IUU fishing damages local livelihoods and food security, creating more fertile recruiting grounds for piracy, organized crime, armed insurgency, and terrorism in affected communities. Compounding both the direct and indirect security threats is the fact that IUU fishing reduces revenues for governments in coastal states, reducing their ability to confront these and other challenges. Despite the significant threats posed by IUU fishing on both the economy and the environment, capacity building for fisherfolk and people within fishing communities is negligible. In a focus group discussion held with some fisher folks in Apam, which is one of the hotspots for transshipment in Ghana, it was noted that only a few Civil Society Organisations have held some engagements with the fisher folks, but these engagements have often been in the form of data collection and not necessarily building of their capacity.

Conclusion

The relevance of capacity building to promote maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea cannot be underestimated. Capacity building must however respond to the fundamental needs and

priorities of beneficiaries and stakeholders to serve its intended purpose. The transnational nature of maritime crimes exposes and complicates the effects of underprioritised crimes in capacity building. The focus of capacity-building interventions that prioritise the fight against piracy and nearly neglect other local maritime crimes like IUU fishing, which is highly prevalent in many African countries including Ghana, must be reviewed to ensure a holistic approach to maritime capacity-building among recipient countries. This is because such a skewed focus, if not altered would continue to present a major challenge to maritime security capacity building. The aim of this article was to shed light on and combine two different perspectives on challenges to maritime security capacity building. We argue for the importance of appreciating both the challenges of limitations to ongoing capacity-building engagements and the prior challenge of selective capacity-building approaches whereby priorities of these engagements are defined in the first place.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE

Tachie-Menson, E. A., Jacobsen, K. L., Mensah, A. N. A., & Gyampo, R. E. (2023). Challenges to Maritime Security Capacity Building. *Gulf Spectrum Journal*, 1(1).

<https://www.gulfspectrumjournal.com/articles/challenges-to-maritime-security-capacity-building>