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Security &
Rule of Law



Knowledge Management Fund 2021

Thematic Headline

Asymmetric Power & Partnerships

The world turned upside down. Depending on your vantage point, this may be a troubling description of current times - the unraveling of norms, standards, and institutions previously relied upon. Or it may be a hopeful aspiration for the future - the opportunity for transformation after a series of unexpected global shake-ups. In either case, it points to a moment of imbalance, of both risk and possibility.

In 2021 The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law will be directing its instruments and attention toward aspects of asymmetry in Security & Rule of Law (SRoL) policies, programming, and partnerships. This is both in response to and support of our community's growing focus on shifting power dynamics and how this historical moment calls for - and might enable - a re-balancing.

How did we get here?

This moment has been brought about by both gradual trends and shocking disruptions, culminating in the realization that current ways of working are no longer tenable. SRoL programming and policies are operating in an **increasingly multipolar world**. The 'end of history' declared after the global power shuffle of the 80's has proven premature, as new trends in geopolitical order continue to unfurl. Western democracies and the values they espouse are being confronted by the rising prominence of more recent entrants to the donor community. With the retreat of global leadership as Western superpowers turn inward, the scales may be tilting away from more normative SRoL policies. Programs emphasizing civil liberties, maximalist interpretations of Rule of Law, and people-centered outcomes risk losing ground to train-and-equip or brick-and-mortar support as partner governments increasingly opt for less intrusive models. What such technical approaches fail to address are local circumstances of systemic exclusion and asymmetry that often make SRoL interventions necessary.

Concurrently, the **globalization of security & justice policies**, largely driven by counter-terrorism and counter-migration agendas of the past years and decades, have created immense pressure for partner countries to standardize, synchronize and entwine their national security, criminal justice and intelligence policies with those of the donor community. This 'top-heavy' approach consistently frames security in reference to donor priorities while reducing the space for locally defined, adapted and led SRoL programming. The vast asymmetry between nominal budgets for local peacebuilding or people-centered justice programming, compared to massive spending on defense, PVE/CVE and militarized, technocratic security interventions brings this discrepancy into sharp relief. The increased surveillance capacity these programs often provide have, in some cases, even aided and abetted repressive governments in their campaigns to stifle civic demonstrations, whether in response to recent pandemic measures or political dissent.

And amidst these modern trends, the pandemic shock has provoked a range of governance responses, inevitably involving SRoL sectors as new standards of social and public behavior were written and enforced. In most cases, pandemic governance has **exacerbated existing asymmetries in a society**. Legacies of exclusion and inequality have undermined social cohesion and increasingly acute repression has further eroded public trust. Such systemic patterns make certain groups both more vulnerable to the crisis and less likely to access the support needed to cope and recover. At the fulcrum of each of these trends and issues sits a discussion about power: how it may be redistributed, shifted, maintained or conceded in these uncertain times. These are not new conversations; our sector has long wrestled with structural power imbalances that often underlie violence and injustice. However, the upheavals of the past years have reanimated these conversations with fresh urgency.

How are we to move forward?

Encouragingly, in the face of these challenging circumstances, many local institutions, leaders and communities have self-mobilized to meet this moment. Animated by a sense of inter-reliance within communities, and – at times – the failings or withdrawal of government and international support, these inspiring examples have catalyzed hopeful energy around **‘decolonizing SRoL’** and affirming **‘local resilience’**. Donors are embracing ‘localization’ and ‘resilience’ agendas to promote pandemic recovery plans designed and led by local institutions and leaders. However, these **aspirational approaches must also attend to exigent legacies of exclusion, inequality and asymmetry; not only within societies, but also within SRoL and Development partnerships.**

Recognizing the momentum being generated around these ideas, the Secretariat is urging its community to match the ambitious rhetoric with **practical and conceptual clarity on what these approaches mean, in both policy and programming**. Given the trends and disruptions described above, how do asymmetric power dynamics undergird the ‘colonization of aid’? How does affirming local resilience help to bring about a re-balancing in SRoL policies, programs and partnerships? What, practically and concretely, must be undertaken to correct the imbalances?

If **transformative local resilience** is to be the mission going forward, the SRoL sector - and the development cooperation system more generally - is called to face some tough challenges.

Among them:

- This geopolitical rebalancing, and rising challenge to Western democratic prerogative, calls for fresh thinking on how to adapt people-centered SRoL, (re)asserting its relevance in an increasingly multipolar world.
- The ‘globalization’ of SRoL and donor-defined security priorities calls for creative diplomacy and redoubled efforts on making the case and creating more space for locally-driven, context-specific, and adaptive security and justice programs.
- And this requires a reframing of ‘local responses to local challenges’ that actually devolves decisions making and programming autonomy, as well as innovates funding mechanisms and accountability protocols to upend asymmetric partnerships.

The Platform Secretariat is eager to facilitate ideas, pilots, and initiatives from its community that address the ways in which asymmetry and power shifts are playing out in security and justice partnerships, programs, and policies. With this latest call we invite you to submit your expressions of interest the Knowledge Management Fund.