



Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law Annual Conference 2021

Thursday, October 14th

Asymmetric Power

Recent global upheavals have shaken the status quo...

...it is now time to decide where the pieces will land.

One of the most reliable forces in nature is inertia. Without an intervening force, things tend to continue in the same direction. Change to the status quo requires a shock to the system. For better or worse, the Security & Rule of Law (SRoL) sector has been dealt a number of recent shocks. This creates an opportunity to tilt the scales of power. **But will it lead to a more balanced system?**

What is hanging in the balance?

The Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law (KPSRL) community has become increasingly vocal about seizing this moment of upheaval to redress asymmetric power structures. While the sector has long been preoccupied with inequality and injustice in societies, pressure has been mounting to address unequal power distribution within the peace and development sector itself. Rallying cries have risen around 'decolonizing aid', radical flexibility in financing and accountability, and donor commitments to affirm transformative resilience and strengthen the localization of support.

These encouraging aspirations, however, must attend to legacies of exclusion, inequality and asymmetry; not only within societies, but also within SRoL and development partnerships.

One key area to address is funding. Global financing for peacebuilding, shouldered by a small group of donors, is particularly vulnerable to changing political winds. A combination of the COVID pandemic and domestic polarization within many of these donor countries is shifting priorities to issues that garner more public consensus, such as humanitarian assistance and vaccine support. Meanwhile, the global economic downturn is set to slash development budgets overall. How the aid sector adapts will depend on which parts of the system are reinforced, and which are reduced.

The COVID pandemic and economic fallout have been key disruptors, but not the sole factors at play. Rising authoritarianism, during and preceding the pandemic, is impinging upon citizens' rights and civic space. A concerning parallel trend can be seen in donors' prioritization of SRoL threats attuned to Western sensibilities (e.g. counter-migration; counter-terrorism; violent extremism), as well as a retreat from normative policies on democratization and Human Rights. These trends can limit local actors' space to define peace on their own terms or clarify when and what interventions are needed.

However, encouraging trends can also be traced over the past year. As donors and aid agencies have repatriated en masse, local partners have forged ahead, designing and delivering innovative peace, security, rule of law and development initiatives without the presence of their international counterparts, once presumed essential. This new reality has opened up space for candid reassessments of local capacity and ownership. It has underscored the need for more flexible partnership arrangements that better respond to locally-defined issues and locally-driven solutions.

Asymmetric Power

At the fulcrum of each of these trends and issues is a discussion about power: how it may be shifted, maintained or conceded in these uncertain times. The Knowledge Platform Annual Conference 2021 (KPAC21) will focus on how recent system shocks may redistribute power and catalyze new ways of working. How does this current moment call for – and how might it enable – a re-balancing?

Objective – Symmetric Power in Practice

At KPAC21, we challenge our community to move beyond aspirational rhetoric and showcase concrete examples of what could be done differently. For our part, we aim to practice what we preach. While each session will have a designated lead guiding conversation, we will ensure every session includes open forums for participants to share ideas and insights. No ‘talking heads’; no ‘talking points’; just real talk. The objective is to create an inclusive space around the table.

How do we make the most of this moment of rebalancing?

Power structures run from global institutions right down through local groups. For that reason, KPAC21 is seeking session proposals that address asymmetry at any given point along the spectrum.

- **Asymmetry in the system** – Sessions that put a finger on the sore spots. Asymmetry has crept into the very mechanics of our sector. In what ways may we have neglected it?
- **Local voices & visibility** – Sessions that spotlight local insight, ingenuity and capacity. How can creating space for such perspectives lead to innovative and effective locally-driven initiatives?
- **This is what localization looks like** – Sessions that show, in concrete terms, how donors can affirm the power of those working on peace, security and governance in their own communities.
- **Flexible where it counts** – Sessions that demonstrate innovative partnership arrangements, such as funding or accountability structures, that are more flexible and adaptive to local needs.
- **‘Resilience’ redux** – Sessions that focus on SRoL terms (e.g. resilience, security, stability, justice) that are due for a radical re-envisioning. How might the ‘power to define’ be reassigned?
- **Courage to concede** – Sessions that recognize shifting power can be a zero-sum situation. How can current power holders take responsibility for their role in handing power over to others?

Key Dates

Call for Session Proposals	May 27 – July 2
Attendee Registration Opens	June 16
Session Selection Announced	July 26
Final Session Outlines Due	October 1
Annual Conference	October 14