

## Concept Note: Follow-up KPAC23 The Hague

Date: Thursday, 7 December 2023, 12:00 – 17:30

From 8 to 10 November, the Knowledge Platform Annual Conference (KPAC23) took place in Nairobi. Grassroots activists, diplomats, students, NGO workers and many more engaged in interactive dialogue on the theme of 'Margins | Centres'.

This concept note summarizes key recommendations that participants wanted to be taken up by 'HQ-level' partners in the KPSRL network during the upcoming follow-up event in The Hague on 7 December.

### Local Leadership & Lived Experiences

Aligned with the overall theme of 'Margins | Centres', the biggest discussions revolved around how to realize truly inclusive and locally led development, with a key role for those with lived experiences regarding the discussed contexts and challenges.

Participants acknowledged the **fluid dynamics of margins and centres**. What one calls margins or centres depends on many factors, such as the scale one is considering (global, communal?), timing and specific momentum, the thematic angle and one's own experiences. Besides, these dynamics change constantly because actors easily move between margins and centres.

Linked to this fluidity, participants noted that **the category of 'local' is overused**. There are enormous differences in opinions and power dynamics underneath that label, which is true for other commonly used labels like 'youth' and 'women'. Support might exacerbate power differences and create tensions if one is not aware of these nuances, so this is key for conflict sensitivity.

Representation is therefore an ever-contested topic. Donors and INGOs should look critically at whether they are not **working with a thin layer of elites**, or always with the usual suspects. Intermediaries and grassroots representatives are encouraged to look critically at their own role: constantly questioning whether they are **'gatekeeping'** or missing some ways to give their constituency a more direct voice towards the 'centres'.

Participants reiterated that more direct and diverse access improves programs and policies, as those with lived realities are best suited to point out what affects them and how to mitigate this.

Translating lived experiences into policies and programmes require more than formal surveys, reports and meetings. A meaningful integration of lived experiences in peacebuilding and social cohesion programming should **start with the recognition of potential complex and possibly traumatic experiences of violence and marginalization**. MHPSS is therefore undeniably a core element of the process of involving those with lived experiences and understanding those realities.

Art, such as theatre, music and poetry are sometimes as necessary to engage with personal topics. **Diversifying your definition and channels of knowledge is important to be open to such lived realities.**

Being closer to lived realities changes norms: for example, on what the margins and centres are from that perspective, or the self-evident use of informal systems of justice and security over formal ones. **Closer to lived realities, the so-called margins become the centres of change.** Taking these perspectives as a starting point for SRoL efforts therefore closes the analysis gap between margins and centres. It for example helps to make clear how an abstract topic like climate change becomes a concrete matter of survival for people living in marginal landscapes already degraded by current environmental change.

To unlock the ability of lived experiences to guide policy and programmes, donors and INGOs should invest more in this form of knowledge. This means, among others, stepping out of your office and even listening carefully to opposing views, or those who don't believe in your specific program.

It also means **the role of INGOs would change.** Participants highlighted a preference for as much direct funding for in-country organizations as possible. INGOs could play a role as an intermediary (if donors don't have capacity to fund directly), but both cases, the role of the INGO should be only to (1) strengthen in-country organizations' capacities, (2) lighten their administrative load, and (3) advocate for their needs in donor countries and at international fora. This means **moving beyond grant making** towards actual partnerships that prioritize skills over procedures, with more core funding and with room for failure and reflection.

## People-Centered Security

Zooming in to what such a different approach would look like, the concept of people-centered security was discussed directly or indirectly in several sessions.

It must firstly be said that in most Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings (FCAS), there is no experience with or conception of what a national social contract would look like. Citizens don't expect their governments to deliver on security and if they do, this is met with great distrust. Therefore, **matters of security are often taken into communities' own hands** (e.g. through armed youth) and violations or crime are not reported.

If the state delivers on security, this is often through military means. These can be the only visible part citizens encounter from the central government and interactions are regularly negative. **The military is given tasks beyond its expertise**, such as governance and justice, and violations are not easily recognized by the authorities.

This fragmented and hybrid security reality means that it's quite difficult to find out what the security needs of people are. Meanwhile, **it is key for successful security support to know these needs at a micro level** and proper functioning feedback loops that distil such knowledge at different levels – looking possibly even beyond community representatives. What do they consider threats and how do they mitigate these? This will also undoubtedly surface **needs that are broader than physical security, such as livelihoods**, which again has implications for how you address security needs.

Those needs can then be discussed in dialogue with the many actors involved in this hybrid security reality, from the military to armed groups, civil society and communities – resulting into needs-based action (e.g. civil-military dialogues that led to patrols while citizens gather wood).

This is a sensitive exercise though; those in uniform are generally not trained to listen carefully nor used to being told they are wrong. Engagement can backfire. **Bringing security needs and delivery together takes time to build trust and should be accompanied with commitment to actual change**, as otherwise citizens are left with false expectations resulting in backlash. Another common unintended effect relates to creating parallel structures with their own centres and margins.

Currently, the international community has worked extensively on the national level and knows more and more how to distil needs at a local level. A key gap is the subnational level, where the different, hybrid forms of security come together and the social contract is formed most.

### **Dealing With Anti-Democratic Trends**

**Participants discussed the anti-democratic trends of coups, eroding rule of law and shrinking civic space.** One key insight that emerged was that these coups should be seen from the perspective of a democracy transforming into an autocracy. The authors of the coups presented themselves as ‘being for the people’ as opposed to undemocratic previous regime that, despite being elected, were broadly deemed to not be representative. However, over time these regimes do turn against their own people restricting the civic space.

**In these situations, participants urged donors and INGOs to not go for the ‘easy answers’ when the situation gets difficult** (rigorously stopping all support or focussing just on ‘tangible’ support like humanitarian aid). Firstly, they must understand the deeper reasons why coups are happening and why they initially garner support. They must look into how shallow democratic practices that did not deliver for the people are often part of the reason for these developments. And they must take a critical look at the sort of democracy they have been promoted. For **too long, Western countries have justified exclusive and crooked elections as the most important precondition for good governance**, supported short-term elite bargains in the name of stability or let alternative policy priorities (security, migration, trade, geopolitics) overshadow development efforts on security and rule of law.

**So, instead of pointing fingers and demanding next elections, donors should be able to listen better to underlying needs** and engage in genuine conversation. Such engagement does not mean that donors should legitimize authoritarian leaders. **Engagement in such ‘authoritarian cases’ should always be careful** and can for example be done through ‘quiet diplomacy’, through for example closed door meetings and by creating safe spaces for mediation.

Secondly, donors and INGOs should remember that in-country partners are the ones putting their lives and families at risk on a daily basis, defending our shared values of human rights and democracy. Donors and INGOs want to support their resilience, they should show more sustainable ‘resilience’ as donors as well, taking risks together

with their partners (and explain the need to do so convincingly to their Western politicians) and investing in creative ways to keep the space for critical debate open.

These creative ways are necessary to navigate repression and might include supporting unregistered organisations, artists, and supporting organisations such as lawyers. Besides, **there are many other ways to remain engaged**; a coup in the 'centre' for example doesn't radically change local justice and security initiatives in different parts of the country.

In conclusions, participants believed that donors and INGOs should remain engaged, investing in understanding, in spaces for mediation, in supporting bottom-up partners that maintain an open civic space, and, when possible, support democracies' capacity to actually deliver services, good governance and locally-led peace initiatives, instead of (just) elections.

**This approach takes a lot longer than short-term elite bargains, starting small and building room for manoeuvre** – as immediately promoting transformative change (e.g. gender equality or inclusive governance) usually causes tensions and backlash. So it, again, demands longer term and flexible commitment of donors, instead of pulling out when things don't go their way.

### **Climate Change & Interconnected risks**

Participants emphasized that **climate change has shown most exemplary that in people's daily lives, 'separate' risks are experienced all at the same, instead of in artificial thematic categories**. Climate change, food insecurity, displacement, gender-based violence and violent extremism don't separately wait for a specific pot of funding to be resolved, but all come together in a complex crisis.

The link between climate change and conflict is complex and hard to proof directly. **Climate change interacts with a myriad of risks for fragility, that only surface in combination with political problems** – so it's not just a technical issue. For example, climate change can trigger droughts, that cause displaced pastoralists' cattle to destroy crops, which evoke conflict. Due to political fragility there are no means to mediate the tensions peacefully and limited resource make it difficult to mitigate the risks.

Although for many in FCAS climate change has become a daily reality, citizens are rarely truly involved in related policies. This while especially **indigenous communities are affected significantly and have extensive knowledge of the natural environment**. Elites make promises to Western partners (to whom this is a key priority) during international conferences and consequently implement green legislation that harms vulnerable groups' livelihoods or causes displacement. Similarly, **international green support is often not conflict sensitive** (e.g, bio crop transition, or militarized or exploited lithium mines) **and evokes sentiments of Environmental Colonialism**. For the thorough cultural shift this demands – whether adapting to new circumstances or transitioning to green – green policy makers need to engage with public knowledge to be effective and green initiatives should be held accountable for violations and side-effects.

The complexity of this and other current day challenges demands a multisectoral approach (health, infrastructure, investments, governance), that **forces us to look at**

**new partners** and take the humanitarian, development and peace nexus seriously. Especially in the light of the climate crisis, where natural causes more frequently interrupt people's lives and painfully show the gap between 'routine development' and 'full-scale humanitarian response': innovative financing is necessary to deal with these smaller scale crises in development contexts.

That need for a multi-sectoral approach can also be seen as an opportunity to bring unlikely partners together – on equal footing – to collaborate. In general, supporting **'resilience' remains a useful frame to look at how interconnected risks come together**, ensuring that communities are able to deal with shocks.

### **Follow-up in The Hague**

After reading these conclusions and recommendations, the KPSRL Secretariat encourages you to think about these findings before coming to the follow-up event on 7 December. What is new or inspiring to you, what do you want to do differently, where do you need help and what seems unrealistic from your point of view?

We're looking forward to hearing from you!