

Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law

Thematic Headline 2022

Reimagining Social Contracts

The growing authoritarianism and halting results for Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) are indications of the many Security & Rule of Law (SRoL) challenges today: trust between people and towards institutions is missing, many are concerned that space for political participation is consistently limited, and significant impact still remains to be felt despite efforts to decolonise development.

Under the Thematic Headline of 2021 ‘Asymmetric Power & Partnerships’ our community scrutinised the power structures underlying the sector and tested different ideas for rebalancing. Building on this momentum, the Thematic Headline of 2022 ‘Reimagining Social Contracts’ aims to contribute to a new vision for Security and Rule of Law. This theme invites exploring the plurality of social contracts and how societies with fractured or contested social contracts may move towards a more inclusive, legitimate and sustainable arrangement. It encourages questioning what societies might find acceptable, our assumptions of what an ideal social contract looks like and how they can come to exist.

Why social contracts?

This term originates in Western Enlightenment, rooted in ideas of individualism and state-centred societies with the core assumption that all people are free and equal. It is an ideal or a model of organising society built on core pillars that people of a certain group assume to be shared common goods. Most of the thinkers shaping the meaning around this concept were historically white, European men and the ideas that have been infused into this concept include human rights, rule of law, inclusion and legitimacy, to name a few. Along with being influential in peace building, humanitarian and development sectors, the social contract concept is also (re)gaining prominence in political debates and policy papers (e.g. it is a key term in the shared [UN Common Agenda](#)).

This theme opens up important space for us to discuss how trust is built between the state and society and what role SRoL has in this process. It asks us to reflect on who is supposed to protect whose rights, and how? It further raises questions of who is supposed to administer justice and what form of justice? Who gets to decide what is a legitimate use of violence? We have the opportunity to interrogate why social

As a lens, the social contract asks us to consider what societies provide collectively, who is responsible to provide what to whom, and helps consider both why social organisations are stable (because they suit someone’s interest) and what social and political organisations would be just (because most people would agree to them if they were to called to decide).

What We Owe Each Other, Minouche Shafik

contracts work for some people, but systematically fail others, as well as to examine the legitimacy of foreign SRoL interventions. The focus on reimagining is an invitation to think beyond SRoL silos and examine the root causes of political divisions, social exclusion, conflict, and/or undermined cohesiveness within and across societies today.

Challenging this concept through different lenses is not a novelty, ranging from theoretical debates to protests. Realities and differences of non-western societies were considered in (some of the) previous SRoL work through contextualisation or localisation. However, there is a risk if the concept

is employed or discussed without a broader perspective that accounts for power dynamics and historical legacies of racial, ethnic, class and gender-based discrimination. In other words, we need to listen to and appreciate indigenous knowledges and bring an [intersectional lens](#) for diverse actors to be able to relate to the concept of social contract with varying values, principles and practices.

What could reimagining look like?

In reimagining social contracts, we aspire to unpack and reinterpret the concept in relation to different contexts, cultures and ideas. You might, however, be wondering what reimagining could actually mean and what it could look like.

Reimagining could mean seeking new answers by applying the lens of the social contract to a changing world and newly emerging SRoL problems, but also to SRoL problems that have proven challenging so far. It could mean situating and better understanding the perspectives of the people imagined to accept or question the social contract(s), thereby broadening our understanding of the range of possible arrangements. Reimagining could also mean questioning if the social contract is a useful concept at all, especially in the way that interveners use it.

More specifically, reimagining could explore what the SRoL sector owes to the people most impacted by the climate crisis, trapped in newly emerging or evolving conflicts, or those recovering from the pandemic. It could mean exploring how a legitimate SRoL sector is strongly linked to satisfying needs in other sectors that SRoL practitioners and policymakers had often paid less attention to, such as employment, education, or health. It could mean exploring the relationship between states and religious or cultural traditions, and what legitimates actors in the eyes of local populations. Reimagining could mean unpacking the connection between SRoL and masculinity reflected in social norms, or exploring how the concept resonates in non-western traditions. It could lead to delving into how certain communities and actors actually imagine legitimate justice and security. Further, it could take us to questioning if the use of social contract(s) in interveners' theories of change is helpful or if it sends them systematically down wrong paths in analysis and practice.

These are just some of the questions we thought of. What other questions would you like to raise? What other assumptions would you like to test?

KPSRL's role in 'moving the needle'

Through our [Knowledge Management Fund \(KMF\)](#), we seek to support reflective and practical learning initiatives, particularly those taking place in fragile and conflict-affected situations (FCAS) and/or societies that are in the process of (de/re)constructing their social contract.

We will give special attention to this theme in our programme learning efforts, podcasts and webinar series, continuing to test assumptions around fragile truths in our sector. The learning journey will culminate in the Annual Conference, during which we aspire to bring insights together and contribute to broader global debates (i.e. UN SDG16, UNSG Common Agenda) as well as those closer to our 'home' (Dutch MFA and SRoL community).

On this journey, we are excited to engage with our community as well as new partners from different disciplines, cultures and geographies. We invite researchers, practitioners and policy makers to use our instruments and events as avenues to challenge assumptions, reinvent social contracts and co-create new knowledges and approaches that would contribute to a new vision for SRoL.

Follow us on [Twitter](#) & [LinkedIn](#) for upcoming calls and announcements, and feel free to [reach out](#) with your initiatives, contributions and ideas.