

Advisory Committee Meeting

24 May 2018 - Report

Attendees

Advisory Committee Members: Willem van Genugten (Chair) – *Tilburg University*; Isabelle Geuskens – *Independent*; Yannick DuPont – *Spark*; Fulco van Deventer – *Human Security Collective*; George Mukundi – *Maendeleo Group*; Sweta Vilpillay – *CDA Collaborative Learning Projects*; Leanne McKay – *Independent*; Lisa Denney – *Independent*; Jelte van Wieren – *The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs*. (In absentia: Anton du Plessis – *United Nations Security Council*)

Consortium Partners: Mariska van Beijnum – *Clingendael Institute*; Madeline Church – *Saferworld*; Marco Lankhorst – *International Development Law Organization*

Head of Secretariat: Megan Price – *Knowledge Platform Security & Rule of Law*

Minutes

A word of welcome was given by the Advisory Committee (AC) Chair and the Consortium Partners (CPs). The Head of Secretariat (HoS) presented the ambitions of the KPSRL and how those ambitions are pursued via the Knowledge Management Fund, a key KPSRL instrument. In summary:

- The Knowledge Platform Secretariat recognizes within the field of Security & Rule of Law (SRoL) an increasing awareness of the complex and political nature of its work, an awareness rightly accompanied by an increased urgency to make SRoL policies and implementation programs more adaptive and better oriented toward learning. This is where the KPSRL is striving to play a role and prove its added value.
- The Knowledge Management Fund (KMF) is positioned to encourage and enable such learning by supporting innovation and evidence generation at the implementation level (where innovation is often occurring by necessity, but is not always visible). The way the KMF is structured allows for a higher tolerance for experimentation and innovation; a more accessible fund with lower barriers to application; and a budget size more attractive to smaller organizations working in partner countries.
- The Secretariat found some validation, in the broadening pool of KMF applicants, that these niche advantages are being recognized. The first round of funding saw an increase in the number of applications overall (31 in 2018 Q1, compared to 53 in total for 2017). The Secretariat also received an equal number of international and Dutch applications, demonstrating an increase in proposals from international organizations, 5 of which featured a (co-)applicant based in a fragile and conflict-affected setting (FCAS). Finally, the Secretariat noted an increase in the number of applications submitted to the Innovation and Research lines of funding.
- The AC inquired, given the breadth of topics and issues the proposals touch upon, how the Secretariat is able to evaluate the innovativeness of each submission in their

respective topic area. The HoS responded that this was a combination of the case the applicant was able to make in the proposal (evaluated in the Criteria Scorecard) as well as a deeper look into those proposals that were being seriously considered for funding (2nd degree of due diligence). It was proposed that the Criteria Scorecard may offer an avenue for AC input, as a way to substantively guide the Secretariat in selecting proposals that best reflect the innovation and learning aims of the KMF and the wider KPSRL. The next opportunity to adjust the Criteria Scorecard would be for the 2019 KMF.

- The AC also inquired, given the long path between genuine innovation and eventual change in behaviors/assumptions, at what stage the KMF was designed to support projects. The HoS noted that there had been experience in funding ideas along all stages (ideation & experimentation > testing & consolidation > alliance building & mobilization > dissemination and ‘uptake’) but that it could look for ways to communicate this more clearly to applicants.
- The AC also noted that the Theory of Change (ToC) put forward by the Secretariat is quite ambitious, in terms of the responsibility it takes for ensuring that research and innovation lead to change. It was recommended to adjust the ToC to reflect the ‘political economy of policy research’, i.e. political reasons that impede research uptake, but which may be out of the scope of control for the Secretariat.
- Specifically addressing the Secretariat’s need to efficiently manage KMF submissions, the AC suggested the following:
 - Setting a public limit on the number of submissions reviewed each window, and providing a public ‘running count’ of submissions up to each decision deadline
 - Concentrate on recruiting proposals from small initiatives that are innovating in the field – organizations and actors who typically are not on the radar of larger grants
 - Encourage current partners to (perhaps in lieu of submitting their own proposals) support an implementing partner they see as a great, yet unrecognized, innovator

The HoS asked for input from the AC on how to address a tension it currently observes, between working toward “internationalization” and “maintaining local energy”. This introduced a discussion about the evolution of the Platform ‘community’, past lessons and trade-offs. In summary:

- The KMF seeks to encourage the diversity of ideas by recruiting proposals from outside its ‘familiar circles’. Simultaneously, the KMF is also an instrument to maintain the energy and visibility of the KPSRL locally, to be used to host interesting, content-driven events. The new structure of the KMF, while effective in internationalizing the Platform, can be seen as comparatively laborious for ‘traditional’ community participants. All events and activities requiring budget support must be submitted via formal applications, whereas these activities were arranged in a more informal and ‘open door’ manner before.
- The AC inquired about the logic behind the new structure of the KMF. The CPs provided a historical perspective the KPSRL’s evolution since 2007, noting that in the first iteration of the Platform (2012-2016) a key lesson has been that the formation of working groups, tasked with collectively shaping research agendas that eventually go through a competitive grant process, led to disincentives for learning. Within these working

groups, new ideas were put forward less frequently as it was more strategic to promote ideas organizations were already running; ‘truly creative ideas’ were withheld to protect competitive advantage. Therefore, the idea for the second iteration of the Platform (2017-2020) was to create more space for generating innovative ideas, and kick-starting new processes by providing seed funding.

- As per the 2017-2020 tender document, the entire budget for activities (except the Annual Conference) was placed in the KMF. The Secretariat, in 2017, designed a competitive process to dispense the funds, increasing the transparency of activity sponsorship, and encouraging (via the Thematic Headlines) alignment among the various Secretariat-funded activities.
- Some AC members noted that these evolutions away from ‘single issue’ working groups, and expansion beyond a core group of Netherlands-based actors, have made it more difficult to define ‘who is in’ the Platform community. The CPs and HoS noted the ambiguity is a trade off, but also has benefits. It allows the KPSRL to reach a more diverse group of actors, reduces the impression of an exclusive in-group, and allows the Secretariat to give attention to those who voluntarily participate when they have something to gain and/or offer. It was also noted by the CPs that more has been written in the Inception Document on who is a ‘participant’, what constitutes the ‘community’, and the role of the Secretariat herein.
- To help balance the focus given to internationalization and maintaining an active local community, the AC offered the following suggestions:
 - Consider designating a specific portion of the KMF for activities with NL-based actors.
 - Encourage NL-based NGO partners to promote KMF opportunities among their FCAS implementing partners, bringing them into the fold alongside Dutch partners.
 - Devote Secretariat capacity to exploring the self-motivation for learning and candid exchange (on controversial issues, common obstacles) among participants. Ensuring that this is part of the “Learning about Learning” outcome of the KPSRL workplan.
 - Put more emphasis in communications around the KPSRL added value for Learning.

The discussion then moved to identifying what is the core incentive for participation in the KPSRL community. What is it that binds the SRoL research, practice and policy actors to the KPSRL? The ensuing exchange focused on shaping and emphasizing the KPSRL’s added value. In summary:

- The HoS began by referencing the needs assessment survey conducted during the Inception Period (Q1-2017), which underscored the community’s value of having a ‘safe space’ to candidly discuss controversial issues that, while prevalent, were impossible for organizations themselves to breach. The atmosphere required for such exchanges often leads to closed-door meetings under the Chatham House rule, and can be limited in their ‘public’ reach.
- The AC pointed out that building trust among community members was essential, and this was best facilitated through in-person meetings (as opposed to on-line communities). The networking aspect is also something that is best facilitated by people coming together face-to-face. These comments also reflect the ‘internationalization’ dilemma posed above, and may best be addressed by maximizing opportunities (Annual

Conference, KMF, VTC connections) for international partners to join meetings based in The Netherlands.

- The AC also recommended looking more deeply into what are the ‘shared values’ of the community, and whether the ‘community’ could be better defined around these. This resonated with earlier points to better communicate around the value placed on learning within the KPSRL community, and how this can be communicated effectively. Specifically:
 - Virtually all donors now require their partners to invest in ‘learning’, so there is a clear demand for support in the area of learning: moving beyond a rhetorical commitment to learning, and actualizing it within institutional structures.
 - Learning and Innovation go hand-in-hand; challenges remain to *finding* innovative approaches and ideas (mostly at field level) and then *showcasing* the ideas and lessons in an inspiring way (beyond traditional documentation; e.g. podcasts)
 - The KPSRL could focus on elevating new tools for reporting, letting go of ‘log-frame’ structures, promoting honest dialogues with donors, and getting other influential actors involved (e.g. the Evaluation Department of the NL MFA).
- Another suggestion came from the AC to define what a ‘strong’ community would look like. Is it a relatively small, interconnected group? Is it self-funded and independent from donor oversight? Is it connected to a specific objective or campaign? Is it a large and diverse group? And how ‘diverse’ is the current community? What is the metric for ‘diversity’?
- A specific question was raised by the AC regarding the participation and inclusion of larger private contractors, and whether this group was considered a valuable (potential) constituency within the SRoL field for the KPSRL to recruit.
- The AC advocated for staying ‘ahead of the curve’ and for forcing the community ‘outside of our own comfort zones’, by examining how the KPSRL could incentivize ‘non-usual suspects’ to participate in the Platform – or at least to engage in a dialogue with the Platform. It was suggested that doing so would require the KPSRL to push itself more outside its ‘conventional’ circles and to step outside its own ‘safe’ collective and echo chambers.
 - A case in point was the theme of the 2018 Annual Conference, “Inequality”, which was seen to potentially cover familiar and passé debates, and remain very technical, or could open the door for truly brave, interesting and controversial discussions. In the interest of recruiting new ideas and actors, pushing the envelope within the Annual Conference program may be a good way of drawing in new participants.

The topic of the Annual Conference launched the discussion afresh, in which some difference of opinion emerged among AC members. In addition to the debate, the AC also provided a wealth of ideas for potential session topics. An overview of this portion of the meeting follows:

- Some members of the AC pointed out that the program, as currently outlined, could go much further in tackling controversial and radical ideas on Inequality. One recurrent point was to recognize the inequality in donors’ (“global north”) societies and how these perpetuate or can be (historically) linked to current systems of inequality. Specifically: the instrumentalization of aid; double-standards for holding only certain governments to account for Human Rights violations; historical patterns of slavery and colonization

and current patterns of human trafficking and migration; the renaissance of social movements and activism e.g. #MeToo, and Black Lives Matter.

- Other AC members pointed out that a program that is too radical, provocative or ‘elite-intellectual focused’ may provide a space for venting and self-congratulation, but would be less likely to elicit concrete ideas of ‘what to do about it’. It may also reduce the accessibility of the Conference, driving conversations to extremity, but ultimately solitude – disconnected from those focused on practical implementation and policy. Given that the Annual Conference is largely valued as a networking opportunity, primarily for sharing knowledge, promoting ‘unheard’ voices, and seeding collaboration, a more ‘big tent’ approach is likely to serve these purposes best. Whereas ‘cutting edge’ and sensitive issues are best organized in smaller, closed-door and ‘by invitation’ formats.¹
- The idea of ‘safe space’ was again discussed, where some AC members argued that this concept was not necessarily meant in terms of ‘safe for extremes’, but more in terms of increasing opportunities for respectful dissent and dialogue. Here, some advocated for the KSPRL to not overly focus on tackling ‘unpopular’ or ‘uncomfortable’ topics, but rather to inform current topics from a diverse array of perspectives and sources of evidence.
- A discussion was ignited around letting go of the name “Conference” – and the typical ‘speaker-panels’ format it evoked. Ideas included: “Annual Event”; “Learning Day”; “Challenge Day”; “Day of Debate”; etc. in hopes of creating a more compelling atmosphere.
- A point from the AC also underscored how creating space for debate requires the KSPRL to focus on relationships and contacts, and motivating civil and content-based discussions that recognized myriad perspectives and visions within the SRoL field. Here, a more attainable goal for the Secretariat could be understanding participants’ self-interest in attending the Annual Conference, and working to serve those interests. Specifically:
 - Finding Allies/Support: Attention was drawn to empowering members by connecting them with donors and potential allies. The Islamic Development Bank, in particular, was seen to be an interesting group to invite, as they are currently looking for partners to help shape their future agenda as a donor (in line with SDG17).
 - Learning: The Netherlands is widely recognized by its implementing partners for its openness to adaptive programming and its appreciation for organizational learning. This could be another issue that could help the KSPRL recruit new members, linked to the possibility of showcasing results from the ARF/SRF (NWO) and KMF Projects.
 - Networking: Participants of the 2017 Annual Conference also greatly appreciate the ‘networking space’ provided, indicating that a generous lunch period and breaks between sessions, as well as a closing drinks are valued parts of the program.
 - Interactive formats: Mini-competition at the Conference itself; open mic for ‘elevator pitches’; hosting a ‘F*ck-Up Nights’ (type) of lesson sharing; a ‘market

¹ Portions of this were contributed by an AC member participating remotely, in written notes sent to the HoS

place' for organizations to set up posters/tables; VTC facilitated 'satellite' conferences abroad.

- The HoS invited AC members to submit specific session ideas that they would be able to help the Secretariat realize, either by putting the session together themselves, moderating a session, or identifying key issues/debates and connecting the Secretariat with good speakers.
- Some brainstorming took place in which the AC members shared ideas for potential sessions, a sample of which are captured in the following list:
 - Critical reflection on inequality in the “global north” and its links to instability.
 - How to include (and learn from) the next generation of social organization and mobilization? – the new waves of activism among youth, women, minorities?
 - What might we learn from the success of right-wing and populist movements?
 - Unpacking the jargon around ‘learning’, ME&L, donors’ recognition of obstacles.
 - Hunger as a Weapon of War – food insecurity and links with inequality/instability.
 - Example of “successful disruption”: when an innovative idea/approach was able to break through the resistance of the system, successfully disrupt the status quo.
 - When does inequality serve the status quo, and how might the SRoL sector be an unwitting accomplice in perpetuating it?
 - How might ‘big data’ and (e.g. crime) statistics actually be reinforcing inequality? Similarly, how might A.I. reproduce the human biases they purport to mitigate (for example in the way facial recognition software is designed)?
 - What responsibility do the curators of ‘new public space’ (e.g. social media) have for addressing inequality or discrimination in their forums?
 - The new dimensions of ‘shrinking civil space’ – where are the front-lines of pressure?
 - What are the inequalities within civil society – what are risks? (homogenization?)
 - When is ‘inequality’ a good thing? How are hierarchies more useful than oppressive?
 - The Dutch no longer fund elections – why not? And what’s the counterpoint?
 - Addressing gender inequality in policing work in new ways, getting beyond recruitment/quotas, hosting a gender unit/desk, gender trainings, etc.
 - AC-led training or skills sessions on topics/areas of professional expertise.²
- Lastly, there was discussion about how to engage politicians in a productive and constructive manner. The AC offered ideas for inviting them to speak but giving them a ‘handicap’ - for example only allowing them to respond to direct questions – to avoid them dominating discussions with their talking points. Also, the AC encouraged the engagement of popular media (guests like Arjen Lubach), which could motivate politicians’ participation.

The final discussion session of the AC meeting centered on clarifying the KPSRL Governance Structure and agreeing to the AC working arrangements. The discussion covered the conflict of

² The last two points were contributed by an AC member participating remotely, written notes sent to the HoS

interest (Col) policy; the shape of future AC meeting agendas; and dispute resolution between AC members. In summary:

- AC members raised questions regarding the current policy for mitigating conflicts of interest should CP or AC members' organizations submit KMF proposals. These queries included whether there was sufficient 'distance' between AC and CP members for one to impartially score proposals submitted by the other. Another question was raised by the AC regarding consistency of evaluation when certain proposals go through a special Col procedure. And the point was made that the public description needs to clarify that the MFA member of the AC is not permitted to review proposals, as per its contracting rules with the KPSRL.
- The HoS conceded that consistency is an inevitable trade-off of any special Col procedure and not unique to the current arrangement, but that measures have been taken to ensure the numerical grading scale for each criteria are properly elaborated and shared with the alternate reviewer. AC members with experience of having reviewed proposals submitted by CP members confirmed the criteria are clear and the procedure is straightforward. A suggestion was made by an AC member that the special procedure should involve the arbiter also reading the top 5 other proposals (reviewed by the Secretariat), to assess the proposal's quality in comparison with others. Another suggestion was made that a fixed portion of the budget was taken out of the competition and designated specifically for activities undertaken by the CPs, so as to bypass the conflict of interest issue all together.
- The CPs provided a brief background on how the policy was formulated, and noted that this policy was in place and publicly described in the Governance Structure before the recruitment of the AC members. Thus, the CP members stated that acceptance of the current Col policy should be considered a condition of membership for the AC. AC members acknowledged the sensitivity of the arrangement and the importance of avoiding even the impression of impropriety. An AC member indicated the intention to consult with other organizational experts to get additional opinions on the Col arrangement as compared to other policies and to revert to the group with an opinion after the consultation.
- Regarding communications with the AC, it was noted that periodic updates on the activities of the Secretariat would be useful and appreciated, between the semi-annual meetings. Progress on the "Learning about Learning" outcome and iterations of the ToC were noted to be of particular interest to the AC.
- The AC requested that the Management Team prepare explicit and concrete requests for advice, and shape the AC meeting agenda according to these points of input.
- Lastly, it was noted that a dispute resolution mechanism, to help settle disagreements between members of the Advisory Committee, as well as disagreements between members of the Management Team and members of the Advisory Committee, would be prudent.

The meeting closed with words of thanks to Yannick DuPont, whose time on the Advisory Committee has come to a close. Many voiced their appreciation for Yannick's long-standing commitment to the KPSRL (having been one of the original Steering Group members) and for his very prescient and ardent advice for the KPSRL to open up to actors and communities outside the Netherlands. Advice that has been followed and undoubtedly strengthened the Platform.