



Learning in Practice

Approaches and activities to
organizational learning

Scoping study | June 2017



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Executive Summary

1. The Knowledge Platform Security and Rule of Law was established by the Dutch MFA in 2012 with an aim to strengthen the evidence base of current policies and programs. As of January 2017 the Platform will be led by a new consortium comprised of the Clingendael Institute's Conflict Research Unit, Saferworld, and the International Development Law Organization. A Scoping Study was initiated to learn from the experience of existing platforms and to discover needs and approaches of member organizations of the KPSRL. Lessons were drawn regarding four principle aspects of a learning organisation: (1) Accessing external learning; (2) Mechanisms for drawing conclusions; (3) Integrating learning into strategy and policy; and (4) Applying the learning.
2. An exploration of existing platforms reveals their approach in terms of the type, the function, the platform's chosen thematic focus and the activities they organize for their members. The choice for the type of platform, whether they are online or offline and actor-based or sector-based for example, is determined by the chosen function or purpose of the platform as a whole.
3. The chosen platforms combined have an impressive track record of serving knowledge needs and engaging in linking & learning strategies in the development sector, specifically in the field of Security and Rule of Law. Overall, the platforms take a diplomatic stance towards aligning knowledge to serve improved practices. Some have a stronger focus on bringing different types of stakeholders together to generate coherence in strategies while others focus more on creating an evidence-base to serve a shared understanding.
4. The platforms have certain activities in common, and it is possible to identify certain unique activities that could be inspirational to the KPSRL. In addition, platforms choose to focus on two levels: either offering 'on demand' tailored services (often offline) or offering 'generic' services (online). Rather than trying to serve everyone on everything, strategic choices have been made to narrow the scope of the work, which is also reflected in the type of services and activities on offer.
5. Furthermore, the Scoping Study focuses on the experiences and observations from member organizations of the Platform. When looking at KPSRL members' approach to 'accessing external learning' there is a recurrent interest for tailored approaches that address issues beyond the scope and capacity of the organization

(linking/synthesizing/*ad hoc*), and an interest to engage with local/field/practice stakeholders.

6. In their approaches towards 'mechanisms for drawing conclusions', we find that this component might require the most external assistance as only few structures seem to be in place to facilitate internal processes. When in place, they rely a great deal on individual willingness and commitment, which might be insufficiently supported by higher management – especially for organizations with high level of decentralisation and field offices.
7. In terms of 'integrating learning into strategy and policy' there are differences among the organizations: those who are in the process of (or have made) investments in strengthening the learning cultures, and those who have yet to engage in those strategies (reflecting the different stages of the learning organization).
8. Finally, KPSRL members' approach to 'applying the learning' seems most difficult to describe – it is mostly explained in relation to the applicability of the learning to day-to-day, immediate practice. This relates to ongoing programmes, *ad hoc* events, and upcoming priorities. The benefits of structural learning mechanisms seem to be more difficult to articulate. In addition, it seems that only a few (if any) organizations have monitoring processes in place that help to assess the benefits of investing in a learning culture.
9. Overall, three key suggestions can be made from the observations of members. The Platform can pay attention in the development of its Theory of Change to balance the immediate and structural needs of its members; it can make strategic decisions with regards to its audience, scope and function; and it can invest in approaches to measure the effects of learning.

1.1 Introduction

The Scoping Study was initiated in order to learn from the experience of existing platforms and to discover needs and approaches of member organizations of the KPSRL. This paper will firstly turn to a description of other platforms that have been selected based on their respected and long-term experience in the field. It was deemed essential to have a close look at these platforms as the KPSRL wants to learn from their best practices, as well as avoid duplicating efforts that are already effectively taking place and potentially serving the needs of its members. The following pages therefore turn to the types, functions, themes, audiences and activities that a number of platforms address.

Following this overview, a description is provided of the knowledge brokering and linking & learning experiences of KPSRL members. Through discussions and virtual exchanges with a selection of members, insights were gathered relating to the following four aspects of a learning organisation¹ (Britton, 1998):

- Accessing external learning
- Mechanisms for drawing conclusions
- Integrating learning into strategy and policy
- Applying the learning

Of course, the reality in which the organizations operate was taken into account in which it is realized that external barriers to learning are present. This includes the nature of donor preferences or political priorities, the pressure to demonstrate low overheads, and competition for funding and political whim of the day. The first enforces on NGOs and public institutions often a framework (project-based or ad hoc) that can inhibit learning. The second may make especially NGOs reluctant to invest the time and other resources necessary for effective organisational learning. And the latter, competition for funding with other organisations and the nature of political reality, may create a perceived pressure to generate uncomplicated success stories for the public. In addition, the Security and Rule of Law sector also faces particularities concerning political sensitivity, volatility of the context, Chatham House rules as guiding collaborative principles, and others.

At the same time, similar internal barriers to learning can be identified within organizations. When faced with a strong hierarchical and centralised structure it restricts learning as timescales are compressed and experimentation is discouraged. Often it is found that incentives for learning are weak, as failures are not necessarily celebrated out of fear to loosing funding, political support or to other external influences. And, systems for learning are often underdeveloped, under-resourced and sometimes inefficient in meeting the reality of a (growing) organization (Britton, 1998).

The following section provides a schematic overview of observations on platforms made on the basis of web-based research. It will continue with a description of the insights provided through interviews with KPSRL members of their learning cultures, and will conclude with a summarizing reflection before turning to the analysis and recommendations for KPSRL strategic approaches.

¹ Britton, Bruce (1998) The Learning NGO. Occasional Papers Series No: 17. INTRAC. July 1998.

1.2 Platforms

Platform	Type	Function	Focus
Making all Voices Count	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Community initiated by CSOs - Sector-specific communities (accountability & transparency) - Hybrid mode of interaction - Epistemic community with unique values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning, research and capacity development - financing 	Accountability
Search for Common Ground	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-profit connecting organizations & institutions - hybrid mode of interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shared visioning - system organizing (coherence in strategies) 	Security & Rule of Law
International Security Sector Advisory Team (ISSAT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning alliance (working with group of states to develop and promote reform practices) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shared visioning 	Security & Rule of Law
SDG Knowledge Hub (by: International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD))	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - non-profit sharing knowledge on negotiations, research, business and policy-makers - online interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shared visioning - system organizing - learning & research 	Strategic Development Goals
Overseas Development Institute (ODI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - think tank (independent) - hybrid mode of interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning, research and capacity development 	Development sector (broad scope) – 12 research programs
GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - community initiated by research institutes - online interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - applied knowledge services on demand 	Humanitarian response, conflict and social development
Program in Criminal Justice Policy & Management (PCJ)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - platform initiated by centre at academic institute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning, research and capacity development 	Criminal justice policy and management
Peace and Collaborative Development Network (PCDN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - community of practice (35500 professionals) - online interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning, research, capacity development (one-stop-shop) 	Social change, peacebuilding, social entrepreneurship, development and other

1.2.1 Types

The different platforms studied have been initiated by different stakeholders. Some follow from strategic funding from bilateral or multilateral donors and consist of a consortium of partners with a clear programmatic relevance to the linking & learning activities (MAVC). Others are part of a consortium or single research institute, either as a separately organized centre or as a specific online platform (PCJ and GSDRC). And again, others, are single institutes or non-profits specifically developed to meet linking & learning needs (PCDN).

Most have chosen to combine an online presence (sharing news, research, jobs, events) with face-to-face opportunities for interaction. Those with online presence only, have a clear purpose of sharing information through synthesis (such as PCDN's jobs listings or GSDRC e-learning opportunities). Those with physical interaction have defined specific added value for these interactions: MAVC's goal for cross-programmatic learning between funded project owners; SfCC's ambition to deliver dialogue mediation, facilitation and track 2 diplomacy aimed at improving interventions; or ISSAT offering direct advisory field support.

1.2.2 Function

The type of platform determines in part the function they have towards their constituency. At the basis, most have 'shared visioning' as a goal. None of the platforms seem to have an advocating role, in which they want to mobilize voices and increase pressure upon specific stakeholders who would be blocking change. Overall, they take a more diplomatic stance towards aligning knowledge to serve improved practices. Some have a stronger focus on bringing different types of stakeholders together to generate coherence in strategies (i.e. Search for Common Ground, IISD and ODI) while others focus more on creating an evidence-base to serve a shared understanding (i.e. GSDRC and PCJ). While the relevance of attracting knowledge from multi-perspectives or multi-stakeholders is emphasized with most, not all seem to serve the needs of a that consulted diverse set of stakeholders through the products they offer.

1.2.3 Thematic Function

A platform such as Search for Common Ground has over 10 different thematic areas they provide information and support in. ODI also deals with over 10 programmatic areas, and another dozen flagship projects on specific themes. The two platforms both serve a broad range of stakeholders (from public, private and non-profit sector).

At the same time, we find platforms, such as MAVC that chooses very specifically – because of their mandate – to focus on research and projects focused on improving accountability through technological innovation. PCJ too has a very narrow thematic focus on *Criminal justice policy and management*, which again follows from their origin as a centre – being part of the Harvard Kennedy School.

While some therefore choose very specific foci, others aim to tackle a broad set of themes. Few describe their choices for these specific themes and/or their broad focus. This would help to shed light on what gaps or missing links they try to fill with their platform. This could also explain why ODI chooses to serve 15 knowledge themes and different stakeholders; while PCJ focuses on 1 specific theme and delivers academic based knowledge to high officials.

1.2.4 Activities

The chosen platforms have combined an impressive track record of serving knowledge needs and engaging in linking & learning strategies in the development sector, specifically in the field of Security and Rule of Law. These platforms have certain activities in common, and it is possible to identify certain unique activities that could be inspirational to the KPSRL. In addition, platforms choose to focus on two levels: either offering ‘on demand’ tailored services or offering ‘generic’ services. Below an overview of most common and relevant services are presented.

Type of activity	Description	Generic	On Demand
Online			
Common activities	online resources (resource library)	x	
	topic guides (guides to literature on key topics)	x	
	reports & publications (guest articles, blogs, policy briefs, topic guides, literature reviews)	x	
	newsletters (monthly forecasts, weekly newsletter, email bulletin)	x	
	infographics	x	
	e-learning	x	
	webinars (M&E Thursday Talks; Design 101 series; ‘What Works’)	x	
	e-dialogue discussions	x	
Inspirational activities	research helpdesk (rapid-response research service for short desk-based research needs on governance, social development, conflict and humanitarian issues. GSDRC)		x
	expert database/rosters (mentoring grantees and local members. MAVC / mentorship and co-development of programs. ISSAT)	x	x
	organizing data according to actors involved (filtering knowledge hub per actor involved in resource)	x	
Offline			
Common activities	Course Instruction		x
	curriculum development		x
	Advisory Field Support		x
	Research support (through financing)		x
Inspirational activities	Executive sessions (PCJ) or High Level Advisory Group (ODI) (intensive conversations among leading practitioners and scholars in a specific field that span a longer time frame)	x	x
	After Action Reviews (extracting lessons, challenges and innovative practices from organizations who have recently finished projects in the field. ISSAT – also called; Lesson Learning Facilitation)		x

Concluding:

What most of the platforms have in common, is that they have made specific strategic choices either in the type of services they offer to a specific audience or in the thematic focus they choose in order to excel in a specific area. Rather than trying to serve everyone on everything, strategic choices have been made to **narrow the scope of the work, which is also reflected in the type of services and activities on offer**. While these differ, we do find that most generic services are offered online, while demand-driven and tailored services are usually offline and require real-time interaction. Most of the platforms choose such a hybrid approach, unless their mandate does not create a necessity for this, such as the community-of-practice approach by PCDN. Inspiring activities are: on-demand research helpdesk for ad-hoc requests, offering mentorships, facilitating ‘after action reviews’, and organizing longitudinal executive sessions.

1.3 Observations from Knowledge Platform members

The stakeholder analysis conducted by the KPSRL Secretariat at the onset of the inception phase identifies a selection of stakeholder categories involved in the platform. The categories are: non-governmental organisations, academics, international organisations, research organisations, and different relevant Dutch ministries. For this Scoping Study, a selection of organizations was made based on their participation levels in previous KPSRL activities. A total of 6 discussions took place with stakeholders from non-governmental organisations, research organizations and ministries.

The observations are presented according to four aspects of a learning organisation that have been distilled from the work of Britton in ‘The Learning NGO’. The author developed an intensive survey guide to investigate the state of the learning organization of organizations working in the development sector. Annex 1 provides certain (adapted) guiding questions that formed part of the survey. For this scoping study, four relevant aspects have been chosen for the analysis of the interview and discussion findings:

- Accessing external learning
- Mechanisms for drawing conclusions
- Integrating learning into strategy
- Applying knowledge

Below the observations and analysis from the discussions are presented. At the end of the paper, synthesizing concluding remarks of the discussions are presented.

1.3.1 Accessing external learning

- If organizations are engaged in collaborative learning, most interest goes out to seeking broader alliances on “difficult” or “new-born” themes. Members find that the added value of KPSRL lies in creating space for discussions with non-usual suspects on non-usual themes.
- There is a clear preference for a multi-stakeholder approach that includes Southern partners and/or field offices. However, unanimously members agreed that such partners should only be involved when such

engagement proves useful and provides added value to southern partners: “we do not encourage multi-stakeholder engagement for the sake of it”. This inclusion of Southern stakeholders would ensure relevance of the more abstract discussions with the reality on the ground. “We should be careful, or aware at least, that such platforms are usually ‘largely a talkshop for white people’ that is based on a Western dominated view.”

- The platform is seen as an opportunity to organize not only large-scale events, but also contribute to efforts that entail smaller, tailored sessions meeting particular needs of the members. This could include bringing together specific types of stakeholders that are otherwise left unattended, or to deal with specific topics that require more in-depth, “safe” discussions.
- In relation to such a “safe environment”, members argued that events prominently including funding agencies or donors are not always conducive settings to the discussion. External learning is perceived as a platform to share not only positive experiences, but also the challenges and “failures” that have occurred. Having donors included in the discussions would set a different attitude that would not allow for “open discussions”.
- External learning is perceived by some as based on a pool of relevant supply that can either be tapped into or be declined depending on the relevance and applicability to the day to day reality. Through external learning, decisions and policies would have a stronger hold and evidence-based.
- A cautious note was made by all members that for accessing all of these realities concerning external learning, there is a need for “available capacity” and “sufficient time”.

“We want to make policy that is grounded on evidence sourced from knowledge institutes, NGOs and others. This makes our story much more convincing.”

1.3.2 Mechanisms for drawing conclusions

- Members emphasized that one of the ways they come to conclusions, is through trial and error: through learning from what did not go well, they feel programs, policies and strategies can be adapted and adjusted to meet objectives and realities. However, members indicated that due to current funding frameworks, organizations no longer have budgets or the type of program set-up that “allow them to ‘fail’”. This hampers their ability to try new things, to experiment and to explore alternative opportunities. This in turn influences their learning, as they see the learning process as intrinsically following from trial and error.
- However, respondents argued that conclusions should not only follow from *ad hoc* experiences. It requires a strategic vision that allows organizations “to understand what is needed to get where we want”. Often, such a strategic vision was said to be missing, which makes the structured approach to learning more challenging.
- It was therefore emphasized that internal structures, and not just external frameworks, influence the ability to use knowledge for evidence-based approaches. Members shared the opinion that “people do not know how to approach learning effectively within the organization”. Internal learning often seems to boil down to sharing through intranet and internal newsletters that rely on the individual willingness and commitment to seek relevant information, let alone use it. Without a structural approach to learning internally, individual interest will dominate in decision-making over what events, audiences and types of knowledge are perceived as relevant for developing their evidence-base.

- One of the underlying challenges is the overwhelming amount of information and knowledge that is made available. Some argue there “is too much information available and too little time to browse through it all”. Policy-makers especially argue they have little time themselves to synthesize and seek evidence for the range of activities they are engaged in. They depend on specialist units (internal or external) to deliver “usable wisdom” that has been drawn from the bulk of raw information. In order to ease access and absorption of these sources, the threshold “should be as low as possible”.
- What is missing however in this overwhelming amount of knowledge, according to members, is drawing from practical experiences – and thus reflecting on the interrelation between explicit and tacit knowledge. A challenge lies in translating explicit and tacit knowledge into services and products that encourage learning. According to members, appropriate conclusions follow only from this verification of theory and practice.
- Once conclusions have been drawn, people often mould these into ‘toolboxes’ and ‘guidelines’. Such practical products are catchy and are often perceived as a way of “drawing conclusions” in a format useable to others. However, members warn that “learning is more than providing ‘toolboxes’ as there lies a fear that offering easy formatted conclusions can lead to quick fixes rather than embedding an approach in the organizational culture”. It requires a more thorough understanding of contexts, best practices, organizational capabilities, and theoretical approaches to adopt a toolbox in a structured approach.
- Better coordination and communication between people generating and using knowledge is essential. Often this connection is absent or weak, meaning headquarters can be ostracised from field offices, and that people with influence at both ends of the chain are not acting with the best knowledge to hand.

1.3.3 Integrating learning into strategy and policy

- There is an expressed interest to know more about how collaborative approaches to learning have actually improved policy. This would provide a better evidence-base to entice decision-makers at all levels to investing in such learning culture approaches.

“At country level, it is every man for himself. Linking and learning is not on their agenda now.”

- Members could not provide an evidence base to support the value in ongoing learning. Despite investments in strengthening such internal learning cultures, organisations “wouldn’t know how to measure that properly, so we base [determining value] on our experience.” Still, members hope to make the necessary leaps to improved learning and knowledge management through “cultural shifts among their colleagues”. Building such movements requires evidence that learning pays off, despite a common feeling that that was patently the case.
- An aspect that would need specific attention for decentralized organizations, is the involvement and engagement of country offices in linking & learning approaches. At the moment, these are less engaged in knowledge brokering – “either because of lack of management encouragement, or because of different realities on the ground in terms of accessibility and ease of exchange”. In The Hague, it is said, there is “a coalition of the willing”, which might not be as easily attained in the field. While members acknowledged that it is in the field where the implementation takes place and the learnings are put to practice.
- Such challenges around coordination are especially relevant in growing or large organizations. There, it seems, that the ‘default learning approach’ (e.g. informal knowledge exchange practices on an *ad hoc* basis) is not meeting people’s knowledge needs. Different approaches are needed, according to some members, to

make sure that staff “start looking beyond their own shaft” where they can rely too heavily on informal exchanges. It is believed that meeting those learning needs across programs, topics and contexts would require more external support to compensate for limited internal capacities and structures.

- External, collaborative approaches to learning tend to occur on an *ad hoc* basis without necessarily having specific objectives in mind. Clear messaging of the purpose of collaborative learning is therefore required to assist in answering the “what’s in it for us” question.

“We require a strategic vision of what we need to get where we want to be. It requires someone that we trust to explain why we need to know something, and why this is relevant to policy. Otherwise, I fear no one will listen.”

1.1 Applying the learning

- When addressing the question of ‘using knowledge’, members across the board referred to examples for instant use, rather than knowledge for strategic development. It was easier for members to refer to applying learning in discussions with peers or in preparation for event attendance. Less reference was made to applying knowledge for structural purposes, and how a clear vision towards learning helped them improve i.e. the efficiency of programmatic activities or raised effectiveness of certain approaches in new contexts. Understanding consequences through trial and error was mentioned as the most valuable way of learning.
- The “true value of learning”, argued by a large non-profit organization, lies in connecting a diverse set of experiences from practice and underpinning (or challenging) this with current theoretical premises (and *vice versa*). When organizations and policy-makers see the effects of theory (also described as “static” knowledge) on practice, lessons can be more easily applied. One posited reason was that testing theories provides a stronger evidence-base for policy, and thus a more convincing story to push for learning to be adopted by policy makers. Non-profit organizations argued that it allowed for their programs to be more attuned to reality, which showed how their evidence could be used in their daily work in the field. Only then, it was argued, will the learnings be able to take hold.

“The added value lies in underpinning experiences from practice with theoretical premises.”

- However, it was argued that those who apply or develop the knowledge, are not always consulted in these theory-to-practice exchanges. As field offices are less involved in structured learning approaches and events, you find that “you do not always have the most relevant players in collaborative learning events present”. At the same time, the link with new academic perspectives to reflect critically on policies and practice also seemed to be missing, according to policy-makers.
- Overall, an organization needs to be willing (and able) to engage in those strategies in order to adopt a learning culture. Their learning stage determines whether they will be receptive or not to collaborative approaches. “Once selected, how do you move an organisational culture? It is difficult and slow work, but it appears to hinge on nurturing whatever elements of a learning mission that may exist. Of course, this does not mean ignoring

those with less developed learning cultures, merely strategizing energy and efforts in the most efficient way in order to build momentum behind change processes.

- To change organizational culture and achieve this sort of integration, management support is required. When applying knowledge, the focus still seems to be dependent on individual approaches rather than systematically routinized structures within organisations. Changing this will require ongoing managerial commitment, external support and, eventually, internal capacity and incentives.

Concluding:

When looking at KPSRL members' approach to '**accessing external learning**' we find that there is a recurrent expressed interest for the option for tailored approaches, addressing issues that fall beyond the scope and capacity of the organization (linking/synthesizing/ad hoc), and engaging with local/field/practice stakeholders.

In their approaches towards '**mechanisms for drawing conclusions**', we find that this component might require most external assistance as limited structures seem to be in place to facilitate internal processes. When in place, they rely for a great deal on individual willingness and commitment, which might be insufficiently supported by higher management – especially for organizations with high level of decentralisation and field offices.

In terms of '**integrating learning into strategy and policy**', members argued that to a certain degree they still need to be convinced of the benefits of investing in knowledge cultures. They did acknowledge the relevance of learning for policy and strategy development, especially when both explicit as tacit knowledge is integrated in the process. External support would be helpful in addressing such cross-linkages, but in light of efficiency, members would need to know clearly before engaging in collaborative approaches: "what's in it for us".

Finally, KPSRL members' approach to '**applying the learning**' seems most difficult to describe – it is mostly explained in relation to the applicability of the learning to day-to-day, immediate practice. This relates to ongoing programmes, ad hoc events, and upcoming priorities. Structural learning seems to be less pronounced, while there are differences among the organizations: those who are in the process of (or have made) investments in strengthening the learning cultures, and those who have yet to engage in those strategies (reflecting the different stages of the learning organization). Trial and Error learning seemed to be the most valuable knowledge for programmatic improvements. In addition, it seems that only a few (if any) organizations have monitoring processes in place that help to assess the benefits of investing in a learning culture.

1.4 Suggestions for the 'Way Forward'

The Terms of Reference underpinning this Scoping Study stipulates four questions. The first three were drafted to help the Platform understand better the organizational cultures and systems of their members:

1. How do organizations generate knowledge?
2. How do organizations tend to learn from new knowledge?
3. What factors impede or encourage the uptake of knowledge?

These have been addressed in the previous sections. Now, the paper turns to the fourth question: **What steps can the Platform take to improve the coordinated generation and uptake of knowledge amongst its members?**

1.2 Suggestion 1: balance immediate and structural needs

There is a distinction between members' immediate and structural knowledge needs. It is recommended the Platform adopts an approach that includes addressing both the *ad hoc*, day-to-day realities and structural learning needs of broader thematic relevance. The immediate needs would help the organizations view the platform as directly beneficial to their work (building legitimacy), which will create leverage for their further engagement in approaches aimed towards structural linking & learning needs.

In practice, this may lead to the following approaches for the platform:

1. Develop a form of 'research helpdesk' to which organizations and decision-makers can turn. While currently the KPSRL is often approached to address such needs, there is little awareness among its members that this is a core support function the platform can have. The expectations of such a 'research helpdesk' however should be made very clear as capacity and resources are limited for the platform. At the present time a full-blown research helpdesk that could be used as a source of research assistance from organizations would be too ambitious. Now, a 'virtual rolodex' and the 'bundling of requests' to organize alternative events are more realistic. For the future however, such a function could prove a sustainable approach to the platform's potential.
2. Re-directing some efforts away from writing policy-briefs towards physical events in a more tailor-made fashion would meet the needs of the different categories of stakeholders; especially those of policy-makers. While policy briefs are appreciated, the capacity and time spent to develop these could also in certain cases be dedicated to bringing together relevant stakeholders in a face-to-face Theory Meets Practice discussion series. Such physical exchanges offer more opportunity for reflection and debate that could help knowledge stick.
3. Structural needs could be met through the inspiration events organized each year, which can convene non-usual suspects to help address hard-to-reach issues. The Knowledge Management Fund will also play a part and allow the KPSRL to link knowledge outputs with the right actors in a more targeted way.
4. Alternative approaches could include assisting organizations to share lessons from 'Trial and Error' experiences, as this seems the most relevant learning tool for strategy development. Organizing discussions in 'safe environments' that would allow organizations (including headquarter and field offices) to share best and worst practices, could prove stimulating. Testing the approach with organizations that are part of the KMF could indicate the real willingness and engagement for such events within the platform membership.
5. As a structural approach, the platform could also consider adopting the PCJ approach towards 'Executive Sessions' or ODI's High Level Advisory Group in which senior officials, academics and practitioners engage in intensive conversations across a long stretch of time on specific thematic issues of relevance for Security & Rule of Law. The interest level of the group could raise the momentum behind the discussions and help attract those organizations that might be in the earlier stages of adopting learning cultures.

1.3 Suggestion 2: make focused decisions in terms of audience, scope and function

One of the key findings from the many case studies implemented on collaborative learning platforms, is that platforms must have a clear vision and approach if they are to provide added value. This entails critically reflecting on:

- What audience does the platform serve? What is in it for the participants? And do the services correspond to these needs? *The platform is not able to serve everyone.*
- What function does the platform hold? Does it have the ambition to create a shared understanding on contested topics, or to serve as one-stop-shop for qualitative research support? *The platform should carefully define its scope in order to set realistic expectations and build a sense of legitimacy towards its membership.*
- How will the platform address its audiences and express its focus? Will it take on a hybrid approach? What added value does a particular approach have and does it actually meet the needs of its audience? *The platform should carefully reflect on what type of services are deemed most effective to meet the knowledge needs of its members.*

In practice, this can lead to the following approaches for the platform:

1. It will be important to develop a clear Communication Strategy based on the newly developed Theory of Change that expresses clearly what people can expect from the Platform. This requires making difficult decisions that narrows the scope, but allows for deepening of the ambition. By formulating in clear messaging the scope, audience it serves, and purpose of the platform, members will be able to engage with the platform in a more targeted way, and *vice versa*.

1.4 Suggestion 3: invest in approaches to measure the effects of learning

Currently, members do not have the capacity to monitor or explore in what way their investments in learning pays off. Monitoring learning effects is a somewhat new phenomenon in the development sector, and would require dedicated resources in order to measure the impact such activities and investments can have for the benefit of programmatic activities and collaborative policy-making.

In practice, this can lead to the following approaches for the platform:

Already many frameworks are in place that emphasize the importance of learning in their programme. ARC has a 'learning framework' and NWO WOTRO has initiated a call for post-doc studies into the impact of learning. The platform can also play a leading role in initiating such a focus on measuring how their contributions in stimulating collaborative learning effects policy-making and the practice of organizations. Some of the initial indicators can be developed based on the objectives set out during the newly appointed Secretariat's inception phase: (1) the platform network is strengthened, more sustainable and more focused on learning; (2) knowledge is brokered within the network in a more pro-active way, tailored to programming and policy needs; and (3) knowledge generated within the networks is increasingly relevant to policy and programming.

Annex 2 provides a selection of guiding questions drawn from the work of 'The Learning NGO' surveying team, that can help in assessing these indicators for a selection of members throughout the platform's lifeline.

Annex 1: Semi-structured interview guide

Members

Organizational structure

(a) Organizational complexity

- Single (and simple) organization: very small non-governmental organisations and starting organisations
- Multi-departmental organisations: many single location organisations
- Multi-office organisation: larger organisation, such as bilateral or multilateral donor
- Network and alliance

The type of development organisation influences the knowledge strategy towards a rather internal and consistent focus (single organisation) or to a more external and open or dynamic focus (network) that relates to potentially conflicting perspectives and negotiations in steering the organisation.

(b) Strategic orientation

- Capacity development
- Advocacy
- Research
- Information dissemination
- Funding
- Service delivery
- Other

The strategic objective and primary work processes can dictate the organizational focus towards more internal processes (research and service delivery) or external focus (capacity development and advocacy).

(c) Organizational learning

- Experimental efforts are undertaken, still uncoordinated and more ad hoc. Awareness of knowledge management is raised (pre-design)
- Strategic set of KM priorities are established and organisational approach to KM is formalised (strategic development)
- KM activities are deployed and support the strategic vision of the organization (implementation)
- Knowledge strategy has been reviewed and adjusted and KM processes are aligned with other organisational priorities and activities (alignment)

Refers to experience and shared understanding of organization about knowledge processes (i.e. Is the organization aware but informally engaged, or already actively deploying knowledge activities?). This influences issues of governance – leadership, management, financing, process and procedures – that impact upon the effectiveness of knowledge and learning strategies. Interesting to learn here is how technological and physical architectures and infrastructures are developed in support of knowledge and learning strategies?

(d) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

How does the organization measure the costs and benefits of learning or not learning? How have systems of monitoring and evaluating been used to map these costs?

Knowledge needs

Interests

(a) What topics/issues related to Security and Rule of Law would you like to learn more about in your organization?

- Type and level of technical expertise?
- Level of contestation?
- Strength of economic interest?
- Level of internationalisation?

(b) What are the current gaps in knowledge on this particular topic for the industry?

- In terms of type of knowledge (academic evidence-base, toolkits, best practices...). What type is most used within your organization?
- What does your organization currently do to address these knowledge gaps?

(c) What information will you need to gather or produce to contribute to this knowledge base?

- Is there difference between knowledge needs between headquarters / field offices / departments? If so, how do you address these or wish to address these differences?

Support

(d) Who are the key stakeholders (both internal and external to your organization) with whom you will need to interact to pursue your learning agenda?

- In terms of strengthening your organizational knowledge and capacity to move forward.

(e) Which approaches have been most effective, and why?

- In terms of experiences with knowledge creation, exchange and use of your organization that have been well-received internally and externally

(f) How will you work together with the Knowledge Platform to accomplish these goals?

- In what form (as source of knowledge, as networking opportunity, as expert base, as funding opportunity, as...?). And what would you like to bring to the table?

Expectations

(g) How would the pursuit of your learning agenda (identified interests, information needs and required stakeholders) help to address the gaps in knowledge for your organisation/the industry?

- In terms of developing a shared agenda?
- In terms of types of knowledge?
- In terms of engaging with (internal/external) stakeholders?
- In terms of organizational capacity?

(h) What are the desired outcome(s) of your learning agenda?

- In terms of i.e. improved effectiveness of programmatic activities; advocacy goals, improved evidence base, increased alignment of multi-stakeholder activities, etc?

(i) How will the information and products developed by the Knowledge Platform be used and/or disseminated?

- What structures are in place within your organisation that will directly benefit from Platform interaction?
- Does your organization have the absorption capacity in house? If so, in what way is this noticeable?

Annex 2: Suggestions for baseline survey

Adapted questionnaire based on *Learning NGO Questionnaire (1998)*

Accessing external learning

- All organisation members who have dealings with the 'outside world' are expected to gather and share relevant information. Their managers take an active interest in 'debriefing' them about the information they have gathered.
- The organisation enters into open co-operation with other organisations in order to share and encourage mutual learning from each other's experience
- The organisation encourages its staff to develop a wide range of contacts with other agencies and to actively learn from their experience
- Staff are encouraged to visit other organisations and are expected to write up and share what they learned from their visit
- The organisation is linked to a wide range of networks and uses its contacts with other agencies to gather useful knowledge and skills.

Mechanisms for drawing conclusions

- Learning from experience is seen as 'everyone's business' and not left to specialist units or senior managers
- Monitoring and evaluation reports and field visit reports are routinely analysed to identify what has been learned from the work and what lessons could be applied in the future
- The organisation is skilled at converting raw information from evaluations into usable wisdom
- The organisation regularly identifies a theme of work and draws conclusions based on an analysis of all of its practice experience and an understanding of the current state-of-art

Integrating learning into strategy and policy

- The development of strategy is deliberately organised as a learning process. Feedback loops are incorporated to enable continuous improvement in the light of experience.
- Policy making involved people at most levels in the organisation, according to what they can contribute to the process and not simply their status
- The system of planning, accounting, budgeting, financial reporting and other management processes are organised to assist learning
- Learning is built into the organisation through the development of systems, operational procedures and other ways of sharing the lessons gained from individuals' experience.
- The learning gained by one part of the organisation is quickly made available to others even if at first it appears of little immediate relevance

Applying the learning

- The organisation systematically uses its learning to improve its own practice and influence the policy and practice of other organisations or agencies
- The organisation writes up and publishes its experience for a wider readership without using unnecessary technical jargon
- The organisation has a strategy for scaling up its impact which reflects the learning it has developed on 'what works'
- The organisation changes its practices and priorities to reflect new knowledge and insights in its efforts to constantly improve its effectiveness
- The organisation is constantly building its capacity and innovating based on what it has learned

Potential other categories:

Communication systems

Creating a supportive culture

Gathering internal experience

Developing an organisational memory



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